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The TYRANTS of NORTH HYBEN

by Frank Dilnot

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THE TYRANTS OF NORTH HYBEN

THE TYRANTS OF NORTH HYBEN

By

FRANK DILNOT

JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD

LONDON & NEW YORK MDCCCCIV

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Dick Carey falls from Grace	1
II.	The Scene at the "Blue Lion"	12
III.	Phil sends News from London	23
IV.	Bob takes a Hand	33
V.	William vanquishes Mr. Brierley	47
VI.	The Arrival of Phil	61
VII.	Phil and George Wye take the Young Bull to Market	72
VIII.	William makes the Acquaintance of Phil	86
IX.	Phil tells Dick the Opinion of the Village	98
X.	The Parish Meeting	110
XI.	After the Meeting	124
XII.	William's Opinion	134
XIII.	Nellie loses Interest	145
XIV.	Ted Crasler takes Offence	155
XV.	William demonstrates his Consistency	167
XVI.	Fred Buller's Anecdotes	177
XVII.	William hears a Noise in his Bedroom	187

CHAPTER		PAGE
XVIII.	After the Robbery	198
XIX.	Dick Carey visits William	210
XX.	The Rising Water	223
XXI.	The Day of the High Tide	231
XXII.	Dick and Nellie meet	245
XXIII.	A Sinister Rumour	259
XXIV.	William tells a Lie	272
XXV.	The Results of William's Lie	288

THE TYRANTS OF NORTH HYBEN

The Tyrants of North Hyben

CHAPTER I

DICK CAREY FALLS FROM GRACE

THOSE of you who have been along the Hampshire coast will know Hyben as a straggling green island with an irregular main road running from the northern end to the beach at the south. You will know that it is dotted with copses of hazel and oak, that it has orchards galore, that it is cut up everywhere with pretty lanes leading to nowhere.

To the inhabitants Hyben is a very big place, and there is a distinct division between the two parts of it. The southern end takes to itself the dignity of a watering place, but the northern end thinks nought of visitors, and calmly goes on its

way reaping corn, trimming hedges, milking cows and making hay. The residents of North Hyben it is to be feared look on their compatriots of the South with something like contempt, for they have an innate belief that all the occupations of town and country are subordinate to the great central employment of farming. North Hyben therefore is a world to itself. To other parts the principal means of communication is the wooden bridge which joins the main road at its northern extremity, and carries it over the tideway to Lutton. Thence the road runs into the little market town of Harton which comprises. so to speak, the antipodes of Hyben. Before complications ensue it had better be stated that Harton can be reached not only by the road, but also by the railway, which runs through to South Hyben, stopping on its way at the little wooden shed known as the North Station. If by this time you have got something of the lay of the land into your mind I will venture a little into particulars.

The Tyrants of North Hyben

About the middle of North Hyben there is a small township calling for special notice. It consists of six irregular old cottages on one side of the road, and two on the opposite side, though I hasten to mention that about fifty yards below there is a cottage of more pretentious appearance, which is the residence of Mr. Fred Buller, the gardener. Indeed, there is little need to refer to Mr. Buller's occupation, for the high quickset hedge running along by the side of his garden is not thick enough to hide altogether the tall glass-houses within. This little gathering of buildings is the hub of North Hyben, and its name is Stoke. At Stoke you will find the village post-office, which in far-off heathen times used to consist of a letter-box built into the wall of one of the cottages, and was later incorporated into the establishment of Mrs. Wilcox, who keeps the sweet-stuff shop, and who afterwards proudly dispensed stamps and postcards as well as black bulls'-eyes and acid drops. At Stoke lives old George Dolton

who has been a soldier and had his toes frozen in the Crimea, and who in the course of his duties as cowman to young Farmer Carey often holds forth on his experiences, and is regarded by the village as something of an oracle; at Stoke too lives Peter Warner and his family, Peter having worked forty years on end for Farmer Tom, and being noted for his independent manner as well as for his skill in rick-building and thatching. There are others almost as important. But Stoke gains its real importance not so much from what it contains as from what is on its borders. The residence of the blacksmiths (there are three of them) stands near the main road at the corner where Copse Lane juts away, at a distance of a couple of hundred yards from Stoke. Here is quite an establishment. First of all is the cottage, which, with a side door in Copse Lane, has an imposing front to the main road, the window frames and the door and lintel painted a flaming white, a tiny flower garden in front, rigidly encir-

cled by a substantial iron fence. From the back of the house down by the side of Copse Lane run carthouses, pigstyes, stables and ricks, while on the other side of the house, facing the main road, is a low wooden shed through the open door of which passers-by can frequently see a glare of flame. This, then, is the forge. Though the occupants of this establishment are always known as "The Blacksmiths," it must not be thought that they are dependent on the smithy for a living. As a matter of fact they work at the forge from choice alone, for not only does the house and all around it belong to them, but they also possess land in various parts of the parish, which they farm for themselves. The "blacksmithing" is an inheritance and so they keep it on, and make money out of it, somewhat against their will.

* * * * * *

The time was afternoon in early summer. The very faintest breath of wind was stirring the

level surface of the wheat newly bursted into ear; there was in the air a subtlety of scent from which none but the expert could have told the pinks, the roses, and the clover; and the only sounds were the whirr of a distant mowing machine, the boom of a humble bee as he swept by in full flight, and the faint, far-away, leisurely barking of a dog. Altogether the day was not conducive to hard work, and the blacksmiths, William and Simon, falling in with the mood of things, were taking matters easily, and with much deliberation were proceeding with the task of soldering the bottom of a copper kettle belonging to the house. William, who had just pushed the soldering iron into the glowing ashes, and who with shirt sleeves turned up above his elbows, now stood with arms akimbo, was a tall angular man of about sixty. Lean and bony and muscular, slightly bent at the shoulders, he had a giant's frame and a giant's strength, and despite his age there was fierce energy in every movement, even in his posture; none could see

William without knowing that he was persistently aggressive, and that he was above all things a fighter. His grim clean-shaven face seared with wrinkles, his firmly shut mouth, his clear light blue eyes told of a dogmatic obstinacy nothing could turn. Simon on the other hand was thick-set and philosophic. He was working the bellows, and his hand went up and down with the great handle with almost rhythmic regularity. He was stubborn but not ill-tempered, not so rasping as William, but just as obstinate when his mind was made up.

As William stood waiting for the soldering iron he heard someone approaching along the road, and impelled by that inquisitiveness which was one of his predominant characteristics he immediately hurried out to see who was coming. He looked along to Stoke, but no person was to be seen, though the "flap-flap" of a heavy horse was now quite plain. In the quiet of the summer afternoon the tread of the old mare could be heard a quarter

of a mile away, and it was a couple of minutes later that she came into sight led by her owner, young Farmer Carey. William, with his grimy hand above his eye, gave a glance, and then went back to his partner at the forge.

"Here's this here Dick Carey coming along with the old mare," said he, coughing up the words suddenly as though with a spasm. "I'm pretty near sick of this here young Carey."

William was filled with resentment, and he vigorously thrust the soldering iron further into the fire.

" 'Pend upon it, Simon, this here eddication ain't no good to nobody."

"No, I never see much good in it myself," observed Simon.

"People says as how as he is doing very well on the farm, but his father never done very well, and I'm sure he ain't a better man than his father in spite of his eddication."

But Simon did not answer, for judging the

iron was sufficiently heated he had left the bellows and fetched the kettle, which he was industriously scraping preparatory to putting on the flux.

"Here he comes," said William, who had gone into the road again. "Leading the old mare in a hemp halter. Got his coat off and his shirt sleeves turned up; wears a linning shirt too. What right have a man working on the ground to wear a linning shirt? His father never done it." Then with an abrupt twist of subject he added: "And they do say this here young Carey's an awful liar."

"Looks as though he was bringing the old mare here," said Simon.

"Well, we've shoed his father's horses for many a year, but I reckon we've had pretty nigh enough of this here young Dick Carey. Don't like the looks of un— Why, danged if he ain't taking the horse down to drink out of our pond."

Simon joined William and the pair stood together silenced by young Dick Carey's audacity. In a bend of the road just past the forge was an

ancient-looking pond covered with duckweed, and enclosed by well-tarred rails. The pond was parish property, but William and Simon had from time uncounted exercised over it a protective right, tarring the rails before each Bank Holiday to keep weary wayfarers from resting, warning back with fierce threats children who ventured too near the brink, and watching with stern disapproval any "painter chap" who dared to reproduce the quaint old corner on canvas. Judge then of their feelings when Young Dick Carey actually took his horse down to drink out of the pond.

When the old mare had sucked her fill from amongst the duckweed Dick Carey with the end of the halter held loosely between his fingers led her into the road and thence into the forge.

"Good morning, William. Got to trouble you for a new set for the old mare."

"Don't see the need for you to take your horse down into that pond," said William, sternly disregarding Dick Carey's remark.

"No?" said Dick unconcernedly. "Need enough when she was thirsty. Shall I tie her up in the old place?"

"No need for you to tie her up at all," said William going back to the forge and ostentatiously beginning to help Simon with the copper kettle.

"Are you going to shoe her in the road then?" said Dick in surprise.

"Shan't be able to shoe her for you at all, Dick Carey. 'Pend upon it we be done shoeing this horse, ain't we, Simon?"

"What's the matter with her? Why won't you shoe her?" jerked in Dick before Simon could reply.

"No, Dick Carey, 'pend upon it you be getting a bit too big for the likes of us. We can do very well without your work, Dick Carey. You be doing so well you take your work somewhere else."

CHAPTER II

THE SCENE AT THE "BLUE LION"

THOUGH he knew the old blacksmiths' peculiarities pretty well Dick Carey was nevertheless astonished at William's blunt rebuff, and he led the old mare back to the farm with growing surprise and growing annoyance. He had hitherto laughed most heartily at the stories of William's whimsicalities and his unpleasant candour, but now that he had suffered he began to see another side to the matter. He told his mother at tea-time that William was an ignorant old brute. He felt the snub the more because he knew the village would discuss it and would be greatly amused (the more so that Dick was a person of some little prominence in North Hyben).

Dick had judged rightly. While William, filled with his imaginary grievance, was discussing with Simon the pretensions of the young farmer, Jim Crasler, who was doing some hedging and ditching for Farmer Cooper, looked in to have the loosened handle of his faghook fastened, and William departing from his usual scornful silence made a remark about "that stuck-up young Carey," and went on to relate how he had just dealt with him.

"There's no man," said William, "can come over me with grand words, and him not even owning his farm, and having it on mortgage, which I don't see no difference from renting it. I let un see."

Well, when once you have told Jim Crasler anything you have told the village. He went back to his work, and Farmer Cooper being in an adjoining field within a hundred yards, Jim took the opportunity of walking across and telling him what had occurred. If he had stopped at that all

would have been well, for Farmer Cooper was taciturn except only on rare occasions. But Jim Crasler was not content; such news was redhot and urgent. When he left work at five o'clock he walked through Stoke, and Mrs. Wilcox being a friend of Mrs. Crasler, he opened the door of the little post-office sufficiently wide to admit his head and then with a grin told the news. After that everybody knew, and although Dick Carey did not hear much about the matter direct, he felt the village was chuckling over it. The whole affair was ridiculously trivial, but it galled him, and when any mention was made of William he laughed and sneered about the blacksmiths in a way which he knew would be particularly irritating to them when it came to their ears.

"I wonder," said Mrs. Wilcox, leaning over her garden wall and conversing with Mrs. Crasler who in the garden opposite was hanging up clothes, "I wonder why it was old William wouldn't shoe Dick Carey's horse?"

"There's a good many would like to know that," said Mrs. Crasler, as she removed a clothes-peg from her mouth, and proceeded to fasten a sheet to the line.

"William don't like him because he tries to be so big," said Mrs. Wilcox.

"Ah, that ain't all," said Mrs. Crasler mysteriously, as she dropped a handful of underclothing into the basket at her feet. "I have heard—though mind you I don't go so far as to say as how it is true—but I have heard as how young Dick Carey owes him money, and not a little bit either."

And so it went on. For three days North Hyben had little else to talk about, for here as elsewhere nothing was so interesting as a rebuff administered to one in some kind of authority.

Dick Carey and William did not meet for days afterwards, and the meeting when it did occur was productive of nothing. Dick was walking through Stoke one morning when he saw William

coming along in the opposite direction. Stick in hand, head bent forward, he was striding along at a rapid rate. Dick with half a smile on his face kept his eye on the old blacksmith, but the latter hurried by without even a look,—at which Mrs. Wilcox and Mrs. Crasler who were watching from their respective doors were much disappointed. The next meeting of Dick Carey and William did not, however, pass off so quietly. They met at Harton on market day. William having disposed of his litter of young pigs, had entered the "Blue Lion" to get something to eat and drink. By some unfortunate chance Dick Carey entered the "Blue Lion" on the same errand a few minutes afterwards. Drovers with uncleaned boots, farmers young and old, pink with health, professional dealers, stout and jovial, and the spick-and-span clerks of the auctioneer, all jostled each other in the passage, and in the taproom, laughing, talking, bargaining, most of them dashed with excitement, all bent on making the

most of the weekly meeting. William sat at one of the little marble tables by the side of the wall near the entrance, munching away as though for dear life, and a few feet away Farmer Tree of portly build had his back against the wall near the enlarged pigeon-hole through which the refreshments were passed. The latter was drinking a glass of beer.

"Hallo, Farm Tree," said Dick, as he came in. "Haven't seen you since you sold me that kicking half-breed as a pure Jersey."

Farmer Tree laughed long and heartily, and then shook hands, finishing up by asking Dick what he would have to drink.

"A bottle of gingerbeer," said Dick laughing in his turn, "but mind you the feud goes on in spite of drinks."

William had heard every word, and his disgust at the mention of gingerbeer was manifest, for William had an impregnable prejudice against teetotallers.

Dick Carey was not illnatured, but he was young enough to retain a dash of boyhood's mischief, and the sight of the arrogant William was like a spark to a torch. With ostentatious ignorance of William's presence he began to lead the conversation.

"The rain is playing old Harry with the crops."

"You be right enough there, Dick," said Farmer Tree, "and if it wasn't for this rise in prices where should we be? There's that five-acre field of mine what we calls Peaky Five, it won't be worth the cutting."

"I've got ten acres of oats in pretty much the same plight. We shall want all the rise to make up. Besides, look at the expenses."

"Ah, you're right, Dick. Barns to be thatched, men to be paid, hosses to be shoed, and all out of nine pound a load for wheat."

"As regards shoeing," said Dick, "I'm worse off than any of you. We've only one blacksmith

our way, and he's a regular Tartar. Oh, he's a beauty."

"You mean old William?" said Tidsone of Warblington who had just come up. "Oh, we've all heard of him."

"You're lucky to be free from dealings with him," said Dick.

William who had heard every word did not look up, but with his mouth full of bread and cheese, he ceased eating and gazed fixedly at his plate.

"He's got a rasp of a tongue," went on Dick, "and insults his customers to their faces as well as behind their backs, at the same time charging them outrageously for any work he may condescend to do for them. And that's not the worst of it. I shouldn't trouble so much about what he charged if he did his work properly."

William began to masticate his mouthful of bread and cheese ferociously, for if there was one

thing on which he and Simon prided themselves it was their skill and workmanship.

"For instance, he can just manage to shoe a cart-horse, but anything in the shape of a pony is beyond him. In fact he's clumsy at all light work."

William was feeling feverishly in his pocket for money to pay for his bread and cheese and beer.

"He has lamed more of my horses than I can remember offhand," said Dick mendaciously.

William made a move and in his hurry overturned a chair, and everyone in the room turned to see what was going on.

"Look out, Carey," came warningly from old Farmer Rode.

Dick swung round and found himself confronting the blacksmith. William, hot with rage, was leaning forward, a gaunt muscular giant overshadowing even the sturdy Dick. His grim face was thrust forward to within six inches of that of the young farmer.

"Ye're a damned liar, Dick Carey," he shouted.

Dick affected surprise. "Bless you, William, you here? I was just speaking about you—your shoeing, you know how off-colour it is."

William was exasperated beyond endurance. His horny palm rose level with his shoulder, and then with the weight and impetus of a ten-pound hammer it descended fairly in the centre of Dick's face. Half stunned, blood trickling from his nose and mouth, Dick staggered back, and while Farmer Tree helped him to a seat half a dozen others with indignant exclamations started forward in the direction of William. Dick saw the hostile movement and stopped it.

"Don't touch him," he gasped, "it's my fault."

William glared round the room, alike defiant of the threats and scornful of Dick's acknowledgment, and then made his way into the street.

Stick in hand William strode fiercely along the pavement, and presently found himself in the lanes on the way to Hyben. He was less excited

now and began to reflect calmly on recent occurrences. Contrition was now mingling with his annoyance; but do not make a mistake, it was not contrition for the assault on Dick Carey, but for a thing of vastly greater importance.

"Dear, dear," he muttered regretfully, "ain't said that word for twenty year. Dear, dear."

CHAPTER III

PHIL SENDS NEWS FROM LONDON

"WHY didn't ye hit un back?" asked Farmer Tree, while Dick sitting in the corner of the tap-room was wiping the blood from his face with his handkerchief. "He's an old man, but he's stronger than many a young un."

Dick caught sight of one or two sniggering faces. He read their thoughts like print and fired immediately.

"You may put it down if you like," said he, "that I was afraid."

He rose to his feet and looked about him. No one said a word, but now that the momentary excitement was over there was no sign of sympathy with Dick. Indeed, the first movement of those

in the group towards William had been not so much from any feeling for Dick as from the idea that William's attack was sudden and unexpected, and therefore unfair, and when Dick showed no sign of resentment they judged his conduct with a smile. The little gathering began to melt away in silence. Dick knew their opinion.

As he took the nosebag from his horse and prepared for the drive home he was tingling all over with annoyance at the thought of how the story would be retailed throughout Hyben. He tried to be philosophic and forget it, but the fact remains that Polly was treated with uncommon severity all the way to the farm.

Just outside the meadow gate Dick pulled up, and then for a time he forgot his smarts in his amusement at the adventures of his mother. Mrs. Carey stood in the meadow adjoining the farmyard with a gallon measure full of maize under her arm and a big, black flock of poultry all around her. She was fully occupied in her

attempt to manage properly the expectant throng, because, sad as it is to relate, all fowls are deficient in chivalry.

The hens clustered round Mrs. Carey's feet, and with many a threatening gesture drove the pullets to the outskirts of the crowd, the miscellaneous half-growns fought for places in the second circle, while a dozen disdainful, bullying little guinea-fowls clove for themselves passages here and there, confident that not even the most valorous Langshan cock would withstand their spiteful fury. To circumvent the freebooters was Mrs. Carey's task. A handful of maize on the verge of the circle sent thither a screaming medley which was immediately forced back in all directions by the marauding guinea-fowls. A wild fight followed. Two frenzied old hens performed marvellous feats of flight, and a hardened drake in the excitement of the moment even ventured to resent the aggressive action of a guinea-hen, though he was instantly routed. The

guinea-fowls darting their snakelike heads in all directions were getting much more than their allowance.

"You nasty, greedy, spiteful things," said Mrs. Carey, shaking her apron and running among them, and causing a general skurry. Then Dick drove into the meadow.

"Dick, Dick," cried his mother, "come and drive these horrid guinea-fowls away."

Dick responded valiantly. He leapt from the cart whip in hand and managed to keep off the obnoxious birds till the less aggressive members of the flock had had some portion of the maize. The young cocks waddled round him in greedy delight, and even the proud cockerels did not disdain to pick up a few grains under his protection.

Not till the fowls had cleared up their meal and begun to separate did Mrs. Carey notice anything unusual about her son; then she nearly dropped the gallon measure in her surprise.

"Why, Dick, Dick, what's the matter?"

Dick's lips were cut and swollen, his eye was blackened, and the whole side of his face was bruised.

"That," said Dick, as he took the pony into the carthouse and began 'to shut out,' all arose from the rise in the price of wheat."

"Dick," said Mrs. Carey gravely, "I always thought you were a teetotaller?"

"I am afraid that had something to do with it, too," he said laughing, and then he told her the whole story.

"You know what an eccentric pair they are," he added. "Now because since father's death the price of corn has gone up, and we are a little better off than before, they declare war. We are getting too prosperous, they say."

"What a cruel wretch the man must be! Come in and let me see to that face before you have your tea;" and then with one arm in his and the other encircling the gallon measure she marched him off.

Tea was over, and Dick with his face plastered leaned back in the old easy-chair and looked at his mother sewing.

"Curious how little incidents happen together," said Mrs. Carey.

"Yes," said Dick carelessly. "Anything fresh?"

"Well, only that Phil——"

Dick woke up in a moment. "Phil again?" he said.

Mrs. Carey let her work drop into her lap.

"Yes, I've had a letter from him."

Dick's face was not particularly cheerful. A letter from ne'er-do-well Phil was usually a forerunner of trouble.

"He's all right," she said, hesitating a little.

"He generally is," said Dick.

"And he—— But there, I'll read you his letter."

She took the envelope from her pocket, and standing near the window began to read:

"DEAR MATER: Since my last letter, which—good gracious—is six months old, I have been through a good deal, and once again am at the end of my tether, this time for good. Mind I am not complaining. I daresay it's all my fault, but as a matter of fact I have shuffled backwards and downwards all the time, and my last place—listen to this—was that of a waiter. Of course the name sounds a bit rocky, but the life isn't so bad as you would think—no end of fun, and enough money to hop along with. I should not be writing now but I have had another bit of bad luck and am out of a job. I never saw such a fellow as I am for bad luck. Now I'll just tell you how I lost this place, and then say if you think it was my fault. My respected employer came into the restaurant one night (ours was a crack place near the Strand, by the way) and he began muddling about behind the counter—thought the money was wrong, I suppose. While he was there I missed a bread

and butter knife. 'Have you seen my knife, sir?' said I. He turned and gave me a beautiful look, and then roared: 'Sit down and I'll find it for you.' Now what would you or Dick have done if a pompous old fool had spoken to either of you like that? I walked to the nearest chair, folded my arms and waited his pleasure. I hadn't long to wait. He was silent with astonishment for a moment, and as soon as he recovered he bellowed out: 'You scoundrel, you impudent hound!' Of course I had a little to say in the matter, but in the end I was told that day would be my last in old Blunderfoot's establishment.

"Let me look at my four years' record. I have been a city clerk, a suburban newspaper reporter, an insurance canvasser, a super at the Lyceum, and finally a waiter; and then I have filled up some of the interstices by taking out a coster barrow laden with fruit, and assisting at a night coffee stall. A pretty varied assortment, isn't it? Now, look here, mater, I'm getting tired of this sort of life.

Tell you what, put in a word for me to Dick. I'll knock off all the looseness, buckle to, and give a hand on the farm. If energy is wanted I am just the chap. Besides, look at my experience up here. That ought to come in useful somewhere. Then, I haven't forgotten everything. I know how to milk, and though I was too young to be trusted with the ploughing when I left home it wouldn't take me long to pick it up now. Tell Dick I shall really do my best, so he needn't be frightened. Expect me shortly. Yours,

"PHIL."

Dick strummed with his hand on the arm of the chair.

"He was always a well-meaning boy," said Mrs. Carey, as she folded up the letter, "and good-natured, too."

Dick was still tapping the chair reflectively.

"Of course he was very easily led," went on Mrs. Carey as she took up her sewing again.

"If he comes home," said Dick half to himself, "we can hide his dishonesty, but there's the question of his drinking."

Then he became silent and busied himself in trying to contrive a scheme that might benefit Phil without giving to the farm and village the incubus of his presence. He strove for some solution in vain. Pliable, impulsive, homesick Phil was coming home; plainly nothing would stop him, and Dick needed not the prescience of a prophet to see that stirring times were ahead for the Carey family.

"What shall we do with him?" said Dick thoughtfully.

Self-reliant, sensible little Mrs. Carey dropped her apologies, and sat looking vacantly out of the window, all her hopefulness gone. She echoed Dick's words sadly, almost despairingly.

"Yes," she said. "What shall we do with him?"

CHAPTER IV

BOB TAKES A HAND

THE adventure at Harton market had done Dick Carey's reputation grievous damage, and from the first he suffered from the consequences. The matter hit him on two sides. The struggling young farmer even when "respectable" is very far removed from those gentlemen who possess the freeholds of their land, but the chasm is enormously widened when the struggling young farmer instead of remaining respectable gives way to drunken brawling. Such was Dick's reputed offence, and Mr. Pearce of the Millgate Farm, Mr. Brierley the virtual squire, Mr. Duller of the Manor House, and one or two others blessed with similar advantages, ceased to ask

from Dick the loan of labourers in time of stress, neglected to offer help when he had extra work on hand, and carried their disapprobation to such a length that when they met Dick in the road they gave him no more than a curt nod. And Dick, in spite of the fact that he sneered and held his head a little further back, felt keenly the sting of their altered manner. But Dick had lost caste with other people through other causes. Old King, the carter, looked at him sideways the day after his trip to Harton, and his tone lacked its usual brusque respect, and one or two of the other men on the farm seemed flavoured with the same spice of insolence. A still more noticeable difference marked the manner of the villagers not in Dick's employ; there was a familiarity in their "Mornin'," and the flickering of a smile meant to be unobserved. All were touched with the belief that Dick Carey was a coward; afraid to hit old William back again. North Hyben's opinion of Dick Carey had gone down a dozen notches, and

ways and means were found to show it. Dick was filled with impatient scorn, and hoped eagerly for an open insult. His pride had taken offence so strong that he now walked through Stoke on his way to the fields rather than by his usual short cut across the meadows, in order that he might look people squarely in the face. Those who ranked themselves his betters had their curtness met by equal curtness, and the report spread that Dick Carey was becoming more and more churlish, and bearing out the promise of his display at the "Blue Lion." Report was dealing harshly with Dick.

One morning Dick was walking down West Lane towards a distant part of his farm, gun in the angle of his elbow, and Bob, the sheep dog, by his side. The October sun was shining brilliantly on the quivering brown and gold of the old elms, sparrows were twittering their belief that winter had been indefinitely postponed, and from trees and hedges and fresh-turned loam sprang

the subtle smell of autumn. In spite of himself Dick was whistling a sprightly tune. Bob, his two-inch tail beating time to his footfalls, stalked steadily behind. Suddenly Dick stopped whistling. Round a bend of the road in the distance there had passed into view the slim figure of Nellie Brierley. Dick had known Nellie Brierley by sight and name since he was ten, but till six months ago she had been from home for years, report said in France or Germany at school. In bygone days when Dick was senior in the Sunday school, Nellie Brierley taught the younger children, and when Dick met her he would with all the gallantry of boyhood remove his hat. That was the extent of their acquaintanceship. The Brierleys had of course little to do with the struggling Careys, and Dick grew up with a vague admiration of what was to him a being of another species. Now that she had returned to Hyben Dick was older, and like herself had been to school, and though he had no thought of senti-

ment her presence in the village was to him like a flash of colour; whenever he met her in the road the unsuspected romance within him would come fluttering to the surface.

But now Dick's feelings were strangely mixed, for he knew she must have heard of his demoralization. The thought hardened his heart. She came along half walking, half dancing, a black wavy curl escaping from beneath her hat. She was lightheartedness itself till she saw Dick; then she fought desperately for her lost dignity, and as she was not altogether successful Dick had to suffer. She came towards him with her thoughts apparently miles away. But Miss Brierley had not a monopoly of the pride, for Dick's eyes carelessly roamed the fields on each side till he came abreast with her, and then he gave her a purposely casual glance. She threw him the faintest inclination of the head, and Dick lifted his hat an inch or two, and after she had passed began to

whistle again. And so they disappeared from one another's sight.

On the return journey, three hours later, they met again almost in the same place, and but for outside interference there would have been a repetition of the performance of the morning. In that outside interference Bob played a prominent part. Bob was young and serious. The responsibilities of life lay heavy on him, and he was prone neither to frivolity nor noise. He was not a showy dog, but his shaggy coat hid muscles that gave him a startling machine-like quickness; and beneath a cold nose, there were jaws and teeth like those of a rat-trap. Yet on the whole Bob was a good-tempered dog; he loved quiet, that was all. But this trait in his character was from a canine point of view a defect, for it made him unsociable. The dogs of North Hyben were pretty well acquainted, and were generally on good terms, but never did Bob join in their gam-

bols, preferring to watch them from the meadow adjoining the farm, where he lay in comfort, ever in meditation, but ever on the alert. Small dogs filled him with a great and lasting contempt; and whereas he was always seized with stern, quick joy at the thought of a fight with an animal his own size or bigger, the snarls of smaller fry simply bored him. He used to pat them aside with his paw and walk away. Now, among the dogs of North Hyben was one gentle little creature, the property of Miss Brierley, a fox terrier, which lacked the pugnacity of its tribe, and was always brimming over with kindliness. Many were the overtures he had made to Bob, only to be repulsed with quiet dignity, for Bob regarded Tim with pity touched with disgust. Whenever the latter approached, Bob would quicken his pace, and would take up a position close to his master's legs in order to escape attentions which he felt were not only useless but out of place.

Tim was with Nellie Brierley now, and Bob,

when he noticed him, immediately crossed to the other side of the road. But then occurred a series of incidents that shook even the indifference of Bob.

While Dick was still a hundred yards from Nellie Brierley, he was overtaken by the cart of the Harton baker, beneath which trotted the baker's dog, a vicious mongrel, half retriever, half collie. The latter looked at Bob, who was many sizes smaller than himself, but he did no more than look. It is true, evil was in his sidelong glance, but Bob's reputation had spread far and wide, and the baker's dog kept beneath the cart. But when little Tim came running ahead of his mistress there were no misgivings to be encountered. The baker's dog jumped forward. As Tim danced round him he snarled, and then with a brutal grab took him by the neck. Shrieking with pain Tim twisted away, only to be seized again and thrust back downwards to the verge of the ditch. Nellie Brierley, pale in face, ran to-

wards her favourite, on whose neck thick drops of blood were gathering, marking the entrance of cruel teeth. The baker's dog crouched over Tim growling horribly, and it seemed poor Tim's career would be over within three seconds. But another individual had now to be reckoned with. Bob's interest had been roused at the first movement of the baker's dog, and Tim's cry of pain had set him in a tremble. The final spectacle of the triumphing tyrant was too much for him. Bob was no laggard when time pressed. He swept on the pair like a cyclone. The impact was irresistible, and the three went headlong into the ditch. A hideous pandemonium of sound rose from the depths.

When Dick and Nellie Brierley arrived on the spot Bob and the baker's dog were producing kaleidoscopic effects, in which great interest was taken by Tim, who, forgetful of his hurts, sat in the ditch a couple of yards away watching the proceedings. The scuffle

seemed to quiet somewhat, and on looking down Miss Brierley and Dick could see nothing but a quivering bunch of grey. Bob was on top. To prevent murder Dick leaned over, and with the stock of his gun managed to push Bob off. Then the baker's dog with a continual gurgle of yelps scrambled out and scuffled abjectly after his master's cart.

Nellie Brierley, standing on the edge of the ditch, had watched the struggle between the dogs with terror. Their fierceness appalled her; she had no idea that tame animals could be so ferocious. When it was all over Dick saw her hands were trembling.

"I am so sorry," said he. "You see that brute attacked your little dog first."

"Yes, yes; I saw. But they fought so terribly they quite frightened me."

She looked round with something like awe at the victorious Bob, who, pretending to be not in the least heated with the recent encounter, had

laid himself down by the side of the road, put his head forward, and simulated sleep.

"'Twasn't Bob's fault," said Dick hastily. "Bob's the best fellow in the world. Aren't you, Bob?"

Bob raised his head and leisurely blinked one eye. Dick called him across, somewhat to Miss Brierley's discomfort. Bob walked to them slowly and sedately. Dick explained that Miss Brierley was a friend, and was to be treated as such, and when Bob walked round her with his shaggy coat pressing against her dress she was quite prepared to believe that he understood his master's words. Then and not till then did the unfortunate cause of the uproar obtrude himself on the memory of Miss Brierley, and she cried out: "Oh, my poor Tim. Where is he?" Tim was still sitting in the ditch licking his bloodstained coat, and apparently unwilling to attempt to scale the steep sides, and thus regain the road.

"Tim! Tim!" cried Nellie, holding down her

hand. Tim made one or two ineffectual plunges. Dick saw the difficulty, and putting his gun on the ground, he jumped down, picked up Tim and deposited him at his mistress's feet, whence he was transferred to her arms and petted and made much of. The ditch was narrow as well as deep, and for a second or two Dick scrambled in vain at the sides. Then—will it be believed?—as his hand appeared above the brink, the superior Miss Brierley seized it and gave him a helping pull.

"Thanks ever so much," said he.

Miss Brierley was a little ashamed of her freedom.

"It is my place to thank you," she said, "and to thank your dog as well."

"He enjoyed it," said Dick grimly.

"I believe I shall like him," she said looking at Bob.

"The finest fellow breathing."

She went across and stroked him. Bob was a little surprised, but he bore it with equaninimity.

"Now I have made Bob's acquaintance I shall know him again. Of course I had heard of him before—and you, too."

Then she could have bitten out her tongue.

"Yes, my undesirable character seems pretty well known. But then I am a brawler like Bob, you see," he said with half a sneer.

"I don't believe that, you know, Mr. Carey. This blacksmith is a very rough man, isn't he?"

"Not exactly rough, but peculiar. For some slight incivility I was fool enough to ridicule him. He hit me unexpectedly and nearly knocked me down. I let him go without resenting it and thereby gained a reputation. You see I am both brawler and coward."

Nellie Brierley paused for half a minute. "The story I have heard is all wrong," she said thoughtfully. "There must be some mistake. I don't think I should care for that blacksmith."

"There you wrong him," said Dick, "for he is a man."

"I am sure I shouldn't like him," she said decisively. She placed Tim on the ground. "Good-bye, Mr. Carey. I must be going now;" and with a smile and a nod she turned on her way.

The lisp of her voice was music to Dick, and that wisp of black hair and those sympathetic eyes were dancing before him all the way down the road and blinding him. In spite of his troubles he somehow felt very happy.

CHAPTER V

WILLIAM VANQUISHES MR. BRIERLEY

NELLIE BRIERLEY knew William as but a vague personality, but after her encounter with Dick Carey she was suddenly taken with the desire to see for herself the much-talked-of William, and she soon had an opportunity. Mr. Brierley mentioned in her hearing that William and Simon were coming to the farm to do some special work. She made up her mind to be present.

The blacksmiths had not far to come, for Mr. Brierley's farm was within a few minutes of the forge. Leaving William's cottage you come through Stoke and then, instead of following the main road, you enter Castleman's Lane. At the end of its three hundred yards you come to the

drive leading up to Mr. Brierley's residence. It will be impossible for you to mistake the drive if you have seen it once, for it is made memorable by a thick line of tall firs all trimmed primly to the shape of the trees you find in a child's Noah's Ark.

The house was isolated by its garden and orchard, outside which were the ricks, farmyards, and stables and outbuildings scattered around promiscuously. Within the domain of Mr. Brierley was the picturesque old cottage occupied by Zachy, the foreman, and by the side of it ran a farmyard, a comfortable-looking place, but destined that day to be the scene of a minor tragedy.

The four old sows lay in the middle of the yard, half buried in the clean, luxurious straw, unconscious of the painful episode before them. A stranger would have thought those sows exceedingly well behaved, and in truth there would have been some surface reason for that belief. A word at meal times would bring them in a canter

towards the feeder; they would even let a visitor pat their backs, meeting the advances with appreciative grunts, and when not too lazy would follow their human acquaintances after the manner of dogs. Altogether amiable and intelligent pigs. And yet, alas! they were not free from taint. Good-tempered and kindly disposed, they had yet committed crimes against which severe repressive action was necessary. Here was a spacious, comfortable farmyard; here was ample bedding; here were three good meals a day. Could there be greater inducements to good behaviour? But notwithstanding this these sows had offended grievously. Evidences of their misdeeds were all around. They had devoted a portion of their considerable leisure to the task of demolishing the old and decaying flint and plaster wall at the side of the yard. They did not quite succeed, but a tribute to their efforts was to be seen in the heaps of boulder and plaster, and the gaping excavations. Then, again, one part of the

farmyard had the appearance of a ploughed field; powerful snouts had burrowed beneath the beaten surface, and for no devisable cause had made the place into a wilderness. To crown all, the barn itself had been attacked. Small holes in the weatherworn boards had been enlarged by prying noses, and on one occasion the footboard protecting the bottom of the wide doors had been smashed by the rush of the biggest sow, who had used her head as a battering ram. The time had arrived for stern measures. Accordingly it was decided that the offending pigs should suffer the process known as "ringing," which means the fastening of small rings of wire in the nose of each. These nose rings are an effective check to that impulse for investigation which distinguishes pigs of all ages.

See, then, gathered for the fray, Mr. Brierley, tall, precise, well-groomed, Nellie by his side; Zachy, the foreman; Jimmy Wilts, the cowman, and William and Simon, the professional "ring-

ers" of the district. While preparations were being made for the operation, Zachy and Mr. Brierley were privately conferring.

"No, sir, 'fraid it ain't but little good. I've sounded him before and it never come to nothing."

"But really, Zachy, it must be seen to," said Mr. Brierley in fidgety tones. "I'll see them myself. William," he added, raising his voice, "I want you a minute."

"Simon, get them nose rings out of the bag. Farmer wants to speak to me," said William as he stepped across.

"William, about those prices for shoeing, I feel I am paying too much," said Mr. Brierley.

"Shoeing? What's wrong with the shoeing, Farm Brierley?"

"Well, from what Zachy tells me I am paying at a higher rate than anyone else in North Hyben. I want to pay what's right and fair, but I don't want to pay more."

"Well, to be sure," said William, "what are we a-coming to? Here's a gentleman like you what owns his own farm and pays no rent wants his shoeing put down."

William spoke more in sorrow than in anger, and Mr. Brierley was slightly nettled.

"I want to pay the same as other people," he said.

William became more than ordinarily serious.

" 'Pend upon it, Farm Brierley, caan't take nothing off your shoeing, no that a-caan't. Never a day goes by but what I passes your house, sometimes once, more often two or three times, and what do I hear continually? Why, your daughter at the py-anner. There she is all day long, tum-tum, tum-tum-tum, neither Bonnie Dundee nor Home, Sweet Home, nor anything else one can understand. Nothing but this here new-fangled tum-tum all day long. Then I often sees your daughter go by in the pawny trap. Pawny trap here, pawny trap there. 'Pend upon

it, Farm Brierley, what with pawny traps and py-anners caan't take nothing off your shoeing."

Nellie's curiosity to see and hear William had been gratified to the full, and mixed with her indignation was a great desire to laugh. Unnoticed she left the group and slipped away.

Mr. Brierley was by no means comfortable, but he knew the futility of argument with William, and proceeded to make the best of a bad job.

"Very well, William. We'll let the matter drop for the present, you want to get on with the ringing, I know."

"No," said William, "I ain't in no hurry, not if you've got anything else to say."

But Mr. Brierley was already in retreat and William turned his attention to the ringing.

All preparations had been made and the time had come for the actual operation. The four old sows still lay half asleep in the middle of the yard. Zachy was the first to stir them. He fetched a tin can half filled with maize, and shook

the maize to and fro, calling the while with a peculiar intonation, "Choog-choog-choog; choog-choog-choog." One of the old sows raised her head leisurely, and with three straws resting across her nose gazed wonderingly at Zachy for a few moments. Then she rose and in cumbersome fashion cantered towards him. But some instinct told her that all was not as it should be, and she stopped three yards away and looked from one to the other of the group, and disregarded the tempting trail of maize at Zachy's feet. The other sows having risen from their rest and shaken from them the remnants of their bed, came forward and with little grunts carried on a short but meaning conversation with the one that had taken the initiative.

"Dang 'em," said Zachy. "Never knowed 'em not to come before. Seems as if they knowed what these here cords meant. Choog-choog-choog."

The genuine ring was absent from the invita-

tion, and the sows, as if recognizing this, swung round, and with reckless gallop made for the other end of the yard.

"'Tain't no use," said William. "We shall have to pen 'em in a corner. Come on. We'll have the black and white un fust, for she's the wust."

The little force advanced, Zachy still carrying the tin of maize, which he rattled alluringly from time to time. In the form of a half circle they bore down on the corner containing the sows.

"Now the white and black un," said William. "When she runs by one of you clap a cord over her snout, and get another round her leg."

All were on the alert. The sows with heads averted looked sideways at their tormentors, while Zachy assiduously rattled the maize in the tin. Suddenly there was a scuffle.

"Look out, Jimmy," shouted William. But Jimmy was not quick enough. The black and white sow saw the path for freedom lay straight

between his legs and she took it. Jimmy's legs opened like a pair of compasses and an instant later he was on his back. But the collision had for the moment checked the black and white sow's rush, and there was just time for Simon to slip a cord into her open mouth before she began a wild rush round the yard. William excitedly shouted instructions to Simon, who at the end of the rope was travelling behind the black and white sow at the rate of a champion sprinter.

The sow and he dashed round the yard in breathless haste, and twice made the circuit, William and the others dodging after them fruitlessly. Then came a catastrophe. The sow doubled and the length of rope separating her from Simon took William round the legs. Resistance was in vain and over he went on the straw. The momentary stoppage enabled Zachy and Jimmy to get to Simon's assistance, and the black and white sow was turned on her back, and to the accompaniment of unnerving shrieks and

squeals the rings were fastened in her nose. When the task was done William rose in scanty breath, but dignified.

"Simon," he said, "ye didn't do that on purpose, did ye?"

"Do what on purpose?"

"Why, catch me with that air rope."

"Never thought about ye," said Simon, a little ruffled. "Had enough to do to look after myself. What, do ye think I done it on purpose?"

"All right, Simon, only joking," said William, who was a trifle ashamed of his suspicions.

"Joking?" said Simon. "It warn't no joke for me."

"I thought I see you laughing," said the sly Zachy.

"Laughing?" said Simon with scorn. "Laughing!—yes I looked like laughing with that air sow a-pulling my innards out. Yes, I reckon I did look like laughing."

"You stuck to her manful," said Zachy.

"Stuck to her? You don't suppose I should have kept hold if I could have helped it. The end of that line was hitched round my wrist. I was dragged round like a prisoner."

The strain of ringing the sows had told even on the iron muscles of the blacksmiths, and it was a tired and perspiring group that gathered in the barn after the work was over. Zachy had journeyed to the house to fetch a can of beer for all concerned, and through this Mr. Brierley knew the ringing was finished.

"I am going down to see what kind of a job they have made of it," he said to Nellie.

"All right, dad. Don't fall foul of William. By the way, you'll have to pay for this morning's work, you know. You've got a daughter as plays the pyanner. Must charge you double for this, Farm Brierley. I say, dad, what an expensive luxury I am!"

"You are," laughed Mr. Brierley, and then

dodged to escape the deluge of rose petals his daughter had flung at him.

The men were just recovering from their exertions when Mr. Brierley arrived. The sows, apparently none the worse for their experiences, were burying themselves in the straw again.

"The toughest bit of work we've had this year," said Zachy.

"You're right," said William. "'Pend upon it, should never have thought these sows was so strong."

"Strong?" said Simon, who still felt rather sore at the stigma cast upon him. "Strong ain't the word for it. I've never dealt with such pigs in all my life."

"The sows seem all right," said Mr. Brierley. "Now, William, what are you going to charge for this morning's work?"

William rolled down his shirt sleeves and put on his coat before he proceeded to answer:

"Well, Farm Brierley, this have been heavy.

I don't know that ever I've done a heavier morning's work. And there have been me and Simon on it, the two of us. 'Pend upon it, Farm Brierley, don't see how I can charge you less than one and thrippence for this here job."

CHAPTER VI

THE ARRIVAL OF PHIL

THE twelve-twenty train steamed into the North Station, and from an upstairs window at Lawn Farm Mrs. Carey watched the smoke from the engine. Phil was coming. Had he come? Hedges and trees were strewn between Mrs. Carey and the station, but she strained her eyes all the same for a sight of her son. To spend the ten minutes which must go by before he could reach the farm was no easy task for Mrs. Carey. Charley King, the carter, had taken the old mare and the market cart to the station to meet Phil and to bring his luggage. Dick would have gone with him, but was prevented by the sudden illness of the yearling colt, which in its delicacy required

immediate and careful attention. He reached the house while his mother anxious and excited was awaiting the first sight of the approaching cart.

"He's here," said Dick. "Jack Potter, who has just gone by on his bicycle, told me so."

And then Mrs. Carey fell to with all haste to prepare dinner. She had barely started before a cry from Dick took her to the front door, and then she found that Charley King, the cart and Phil were in sight. Charley King was in the back of the cart with the luggage; Phil, a slim figure in shabby tweeds, with a bowler hat at the back of his head, had hold of the reins, and, sitting on the front board of the cart, was urging the old mare forward at the top of her speed. The cart swung heavily from side to side creaking and groaning at the unusual treatment, and the old mare came on in a thunderous canter that caused the men at work in the fields to look up from the harrow or the plough, and made the children in the roads crouch close to the hedges.

"Phil all over," said Dick.

The cart stopped suddenly in front of the house, and Phil sprang out. In a dozen strides he was over the doorstep, with his mother's arms round his neck.

One might easily have imagined that Phil's home-coming had long been eagerly anticipated, and that his appearance was the signal for general rejoicing. Mrs. Carey beamed with gladness at the sight of her long-absent boy, and Dick was stirred with pleasure at Phil's familiar face, and his good-humoured, whimsical ways. Misgivings were for the present laid by. And indeed Dick and his mother were asking themselves whether it was not possible that, after all, Phil's experiences had borne fruit, and that they would find their fears premature and ungrounded. Phil gave reason for their sudden hope. His thin, clean-shaven face, his merry blue eyes, and over all his bubbling, good nature, showed no hint of vicious courses. He rattled on irresistibly, and

Mrs. Carey divided her time between listening to him and carving the sirloin of beef (a Sunday joint to mark the occasion), while Dick, toying with one of the company silver forks on the tablecloth, leaned forward in interest at the experiences of the scapegrace.

"Ripping," said Phil. "Haven't had such a dinner since I went away."

"And you in a restaurant," said Mrs. Carey.

"Oh, the food there wasn't like yours, you know, mater. I haven't told you of my adventure the evening I left, have I?"

"When you took the chair?" said Dick.

"No; after that, in the evening. I had to get level you know, and with a little thinking I hit on a scheme which I thought would cause more than a small amount of trouble. I moved the messenger call in the office to 'Policeman' and 'Fire Alarm.' The turning of this indicator communicated with a depot, and whatever you want is sent to you. See? Well, you can guess what

happened. Blunderfoot, the pompous old fool, always took great care to keep his marble halls select. He was glowering at me from behind the bar when a policeman tramped heavily in. 'Which is the lot, sir?' said he under his breath, glancing at the groups of customers seated round the tables. Of course old Blunderfoot was furious. 'You impudent rascal,' he said, 'what do you mean? I don't have policemen to interfere with my customers. Your superiors shall hear of this,' and a lot more to the same effect. The policeman looked at me and shook his head good-naturedly. 'I see how it is,' said he quietly, as he turned to go. 'Guvnor's had a drop to-night,' he remarked confidentially as he passed, and we nodded agreement. The policeman was hardly out of sight when, with a rattle and a roar, the fire engine dashed up. Before you could say Jack Robinson a couple of lengths of hose had been carried into the shop, and the engineer in charge had dashed up the steps axe in hand.

'Where's the outbreak, sir?' he said. 'What outbreak?' shrieked old Blunderfoot. 'What do you mean? How dare you enter my place like this! You are an impostor!' He was almost foaming. The officer looked at him and made a gesture of disgust. 'Is there any responsible person here who can tell me where the fire is to be found?' he said sharply, as he looked round. 'Perhaps it's in the cellar,' said I. 'This way.' Down rushed the officer after me, followed by two men dragging the hose with them. Naturally we found no fire. 'I expect the guvnor's been having a bit of fun with you,' said I as we came up the stairs. 'He'll find it expensive fun,' said the officer grimly. When we got into the shop old Blunderfoot was raving. He raved at the firemen and raved at the waiters, and with a good many violent oaths roared that the whole thing was a conspiracy. And there was a big crowd outside shouting encouragement. Oh, it was a grand sight. I never laughed so much in

my life. In the thick of the muddle I came away."

And so Phil galloped on throughout the meal, forcing Mrs. Carey and Dick to laugh even when their country consciences told them the subject was no laughing matter.

"You know," said Phil at length, "I am literally going to put my hand to the plough now. There will be no turning back."

"That's all right," said Dick. "We'll talk of that to-morrow."

"No, I won't put it off for a moment," said Phil, enthusiastically. "Shall I take on the cows again? You can sack the cowman at the end of the week. That will save something, won't it?"

"Don't think we shall go so far as that just at present," said Dick. "You must work into it gently. We mustn't be too hard on you at first."

"All right, my boy, just as you like. I'm in your hands. All I want is to get to work at something. But don't think I'm going to be a burden

to you while I'm learning to be useful. See this?" And he took his meerschaum pipe from his mouth. "This pipe represents a good many pounds."

Mrs. Carey and Dick examined it.

"Just a plain meerschaum," said Dick handing it back.

"Yes," said Phil, "that's where its value comes in," and he nodded knowingly across the table. "Why, the very plainness of the pipe tells of its genuineness. Imitations as a rule are highly elaborate, and for that reason they often fail to deceive."

"Do you mean that this pipe is an imitation?"

"Exactly," said Phil, as if no further explanation were required.

"Well, what's that got to do with its being worth pounds?"

Phil opened wide his frank blue eyes in surprise at his brother's obtuseness.

"That, my boy, is the very reason three months have gone by since I wrote saying that I was

coming home. I have done very well in those three months, though all the time I was aching to get back to the old place again. I made a few pounds out of the business, but I'm hanged if it didn't all melt like butter, and here I am as poor as ever."

Phil rose from the table, and unfastened his portmanteau from which he produced a quantity of pawn tickets strung together on a string.

"It's a little discovery of my own," explained Phil. "You buy the pipes in Houndsditch each in case complete for seven and six a dozen, give 'em this artistic colouring (and that's my secret) and there you have a well-used, genuine old meerschaum pipe. Then you do a tour round the town, leaving a pipe at every pawnbroker's you drop across, just to raise your fare home, having lost your purse. See? Believe me the imitation is a good one, for each of those pipes will bring in eighteen pence or two shillings."

For a minute there was silence.

"It doesn't seem very honest," said Mrs. Carey at last.

"Honest?" said Phil. "There's nobody to lose by it except the pawnbrokers. I don't see any dishonesty in that."

"I hope you have finished with the game," said Dick.

"Finished? Not likely. Why, I've brought with me a box with a gross of them. And I've got a pipe besides in nearly every pocket. Look here, and here," said he, producing a red morocco case in each hand. "Now, my idea is to pop round to Portsmouth and other towns, and work them off. Bring in a good bit you know, old man. I call it a good joke. That reminds me I had a bit of a spree coming from Harton about this same business. You know that sanctimonious, prim old Brierley. He was in the train and I thought I'd shock him. I know he doesn't smoke, and I forced the conversation, and after telling him one or two funny stories which he

didn't want to hear, I explained to him the whole business of these pipes, and at the end asked him to accept one of them. Oh, my word, Dick, you ought to have seen his face."

"Was Mr. Brierley alone?" asked Dick.

"No, he had young Nellie with him. What a nice-looking girl she's grown?"

Dick was very calm.

"You'll either send away that lot of pipes, or take them away yourself," he said. "This farm is not to be a depot for a London sharp."

CHAPTER VII

PHIL AND GEORGE WYE TAKE THE YOUNG BULL TO MARKET

In compliance with what he thought his brother's whim, Phil sent away the pipes, and remained on at the farm, and in spasms of earnestness tried his best to be of value. Alas, poor Phil! The leopard cannot change its spots, and Phil's indiscretions more than neutralized his work. The Careys had lost caste before, but now that Phil was occasionally to be seen and heard coming home from the "Yew Tree" singing at the top of his voice, no one had hesitation in giving an opinion. But the matter did not end with the statement of opinions. Ugly rumors about Dick's financial position began to arise, and no sooner

was an amount due from him than payment was demanded. Dick paid; but at times the general distrust was galling, and not infrequently materially inconvenient. But Dick kept a smiling face, and as for Phil, come rain or shine, he was always merry. Mrs. Carey, though she never said a discouraging word, occasionally showed signs of anxiety, for she instinctively feared the future.

And that was the state of matters at Lawn Farm when one morning Dick received a curt note from Mr. Brierley asking for the payment of the interest due on the mortgage. For the day or two Dick was short of money, but never would he confess that to the austere Mr. Brierley.

"I have been wanting to get rid of that yearling bull for a long time," he said, "and as it's market day Phil and George Wye may as well take him into Harton. He'll bring in enough to settle this affair, and the worry of the creature will be off my hands."

And that was how it was that Phil and George

Wye, a youth of eighteen, came to take the black bull to market. The operation was not so simple as it seems. The road to Harton lay for the most part between country lanes, bounded by hedges with many inviting gaps, and with open gates at frequent intervals.

The young black bull was quiet and almost sullen in disposition, but he was subject to sudden impulses, and it was possible the journey would be an anxious, even an exciting one. These facts were recognized and due precautions taken. First of all the young bull was given a tempting feed of mangel-wurzel, while two long pieces of cord were fastened, one to each horn, thus providing for his attendants a means of guiding him, and if necessary of restraining him.

The young bull knew there was something unusual in the air. All the artifices of Dick and Mark Forday, and Phil and George Wye were needed to attract him to the corner of the farmyard, and to get him to partake of the mangel.

He could not understand why he was separated from his companions. Where was his mother, whose side he had not left since the weaning period? Where were his mother's associates? Why this strange solitude? But still chopped mangel does not come every day into the life of a young bull, and he decided to make the most of his opportunities. And so after a good deal of scheming the guide lines were fixed on his incipient horns. He was allowed to finish his mangel, and then Phil and George Wye took the ends of their respective lines, and prepared to make a start. The black bull walked quietly to the farmyard gate and into the road, Mark Forday, the while, prodding him with a stick. But when the young bull reached the road a change came over him. What his idea was none can tell. Whether he had a premonition of Harton market, whether by some occult means he had divined the whole of the intentions of his two-legged acquaintances and had determined to thwart them, or whether

he was seized with the madness born of despair, none will ever know. But whatever prompted him, he took an extraordinary course of action, and showed traces of character hitherto unsuspected. As soon as he reached the middle of the road he stretched himself at full length in the dust, not hastily, but with a deliberation born of concentrated purpose. There he lay, his head extended, as if he were dead.

"Well, I'll be hanged," said Mark Forday, as he plied his stick without result.

"Confound him," said Dick, as he vainly tugged at Phil's rope in his effort to move the obstinate animal. George Wye pulled away viciously, and Phil laughed merrily at the whole business. A council of war followed, but no method could be devised for moving the bull, and at last it was decided that he should be allowed to remain as he was till he chose to move on his own account. Phil and George Wye kept a watch on him.

Twenty minutes went by, but there lay the bull

as if by the work of a pole-axe. Then suddenly he leapt to his feet. Fortunately Phil and George were in possession of the ends of their lines, and were consequently on the alert at the first movement. The young bull gave them no time to think; he was off at a breakneck pace in the direction of Harton. The three rushed on panting and stumbling for a quarter of a mile. George Wye struggled violently to moderate the pace, but he was dragged along like a feather, and as for Phil he was so amused that finally he could do no more than stick to the end of his rope. Then came an abrupt stop. All three were traversing at full speed the turf by the side of the road when the young bull made a false step. The next instant he put his head between his front legs and appeared to stick his horns into the ground. He turned a complete somersault, and his sturdy back came down on the ground with a crash that shook every bone in his body.

"Broke his back this time," gasped George

Wye. "Sure enough, have to fetch a butcher now, I reckon."

But George Wye had miscalculated. Half a minute later the young bull had scrambled to a standing position, fit and fresh as ever. He turned and gave a look at his followers, and then set off at a sharp trot, the speed of which his attendants vainly tried to regulate.

How many stoppages occurred, how often the young bull broke through into the meadows and fields on each side, the amount of the damage he occasioned—all these things are beyond the memory of Phil and George Wye. Certain it is he gave plain proof of an evilness of disposition which till then had been unrevealed. He performed all kinds of mad pranks, to the extreme annoyance of George Wye and the unrestrained delight of Phil.

After many and varied experiences the trio reached the end of the lane, at the confines of Hyben, and were about to enter on the bridge

leading to Lutton. George Wye was congratulating himself that from henceforth the well-kept hedges and railings would make his task far easier, when these pleasant reflections were all in a moment turned to bitterness. The young bull in a last dash for freedom had leapt the hedge of the last field in Hyben, dragging the cords from the hands of his drivers, and was now careering wildly among the ripening wheat. Nothing remained but to go after him in spite of the damage to the corn.

George Wye had the instincts of a general. "He can't get out of this ten-acre lot," he said, "except at the place where the old stile used to stand. I'll get up there without his seeing me, and if you stops down here by the side of the quickset hedge, I'll drive him past you. You'll be able to grab the rope, and if you hangs on he won't be able to get fur in this here heavy ground, and we'll have him out before he knows where he is. Wonder what old Brierley would say if he

come along and saw him trampling down his wheat?"

With this final meditation George Wye made a circle round to his position, and his action was followed by that of Phil, who crouched beneath the quickset hedge. Matters turned out as George Wye expected. The young bull made for the opening which used to contain the old stile, from whence he was promptly turned back by the watcher. George Wye was in deadly earnest. He wanted to get the young bull to market, and these continual accidents were worrying him. He saw the time slipping away, and he knew it was advisable to get to Harton early. He watched, then, with considerable anxiety as the young bull made his way to where Phil lay concealed. The young bull steadily approached, his black back rising and falling above the rolling sea of wheat like a porpoise. George Wye was in a tremor. "Right up to the very place, and he don't see him," he muttered. "There he goes,

there he goes!" The young bull was exactly opposite Phil's hiding place. George Wye watched and held his breath. The young bull caught sight of Phil, and turning at a right angle, threw his heels in the air preliminary to another gallop. Phil sprang up. "Now," thought George Wye. But Phil, carried away with the excitement of the moment, cared nought for the rope trailing at his feet. He gave a weird shriek, and threw his arms aloft to frighten to still further exertions the rushing, plunging bull. Then he stood and laughed immoderately as the young bull clove for himself a passage in the wheat to a distant corner of the field. George Wye's disgust was deep and strong. He could hardly contain himself.

"What did ye do that for?" he said. "Looks as if we shan't get to Harton to-day. I dunno what Mr. Dick would say."

But Phil was too much amused to answer.

Strangely enough, after ten minutes' fruitless chasing the young bull voluntarily stepped from

the wheatfield over the hedge into the road again. Like a flash George Wye was over the hedge after him, and secured a hold on one of the ropes. Phil joined him, and having been sobered by the hard work of racing through the wheat seized the other rope with more seriousness than he had yet shown. But their troubles were not yet over. They had hardly set the bull in motion on his rightful course again before they were startled by an apparition which shook George Wye's soul to the depths. Above the hedge of the wheatfield appeared the face of Mr. Brierley. He was panting as if from running.

"What do you mean by chasing through my wheat in this manner?" he shouted.

George Wye stood aghast, but Phil was equal to the emergency.

"Who is this man, George?"

Phil's barefaced audacity, and the awe inspired by the presence of Mr. Brierley, took from George Wye the power of speech, and he stood gazing

from one to the other helplessly. Phil looked at him for half a minute, and then, getting no answer, turned to Mr. Brierley.

"It appears," said he, "my companion knows as little of you as I do."

"I don't want insolence, sir. Why were you galloping through my corn?"

"Really, sir, even from an old acquaintance one could hardly excuse such a tone." Phil was grave and respectful.

"I want to know why you were trampling down my corn. I am not prepared to bandy nonsense with you."

"Strange, strange," said Phil in an audible soliloquy. "Perhaps it's the heat of the sun. Be calm, sir. Try to think where you live, and my companion shall take you there."

"You've been drinking again, Phil Carey."

"Poor fellow, poor fellow," said Phil pityingly. "His friends ought really to know better."

And then, without waiting to hear a reply, Phil,

with George Wye at his heels, set off after the young bull. George Wye was confused by all he had heard, and knew not whether to regard Phil as a lunatic or a hero. He inclined to the latter.

The young bull required attention, and all thought of the encounter with Mr. Brierley was driven from Phil's mind by a final adventure, a triumph for the young bull. On the outskirts of Harton was the residence of Lawyer Regtop, and the young bull took advantage of the open gate and trotted up the drive, with Phil and George Wye in hot pursuit. He dashed through the shrubs, across the flower beds, and lastly trotted over the tennis ground, digging his hoofs into the soft turf and bursting through the net. Every moment the pursuers expected to see an irate gardener or coachman who would meet them with a volley of strong words, and George Wye pictured to himself the awful consequences if Mr. Regtop himself were to appear on the scene. But the young bull was troubled by none of these con-

siderations, and having done as much damage as could reasonably be expected in the time at his disposal, he retraced his steps down the gravel path, made for the open gate, and started off quietly in the direction of the market. Strangely enough, none connected with lawyer Regtop's establishment seemed to have seen the chase through the grounds, a fact that tickled Phil immensely, and caused him to shake with laughter at the thought of the eventual discovery of the havoc.

CHAPTER VIII

WILLIAM MAKES THE ACQUAINTANCE OF PHIL

THOUGH they were hardened old bachelors, William and Simon were not troubled with domestic worries, the cares of the household falling on the strong shoulders of William's sister, Rettie. Never was there a more careful manager, never a sterner economist, when occasion required, than Rettie. Who in North Hyben had not heard of the historic battle, with regard to "buttcher's meat"? As narrated by William to his friendly neighbour, Fred Buller, the story made Rettie a terrible tyrant.

"Ye know, Fred," said William, "Simon and me ain't a greedy lot. Bit of bread and cheese

and a glass of beer good enough for us most any time, with a piece of fat pork for dinner, or maybe a bit of bacon. I don't suppose, Fred, we've had a bit of buttcher's meat in the house since my poor father was ill and died, thirty-five year ago. When the salt pork runs short we kills a pig and there you are. Me and Simon, we thought we should like a change. We said to the old gal: 'Look here, let's have a piece of buttcher's meat for Sunday.' 'Pend on it, Fred, ye'd have thought we had hit her thirt the head with a hammer she was so surprised. 'Buttcher's meat,' says she, 'buttcher's meat! Perhaps you'd like me to order some hot-house grapes or some watermellings?' 'No,' says we, 'what we thought was that a leg of mutton would be a nice change for Sunday.' 'A leg of mutton,' says she, 'with two hands of pork in the salt-tub and a side of bacon hanging in the kitchen. Yes, it looks as if we wanted a leg of mutton. If we haves that air buttcher's cart here it's all up with us. There was

Farmer Twin, when he come here he never had no meat but what he killed hisself, and he got on all right while he done that. Now look at un; haves buttcher's meat twice a week, so they says; and there he is, he can't hardly pay his way. There won't be no buttcher's cart call here, William,' she says. And we didn't have no buttcher's meat, for you know, Fred, our old gal she's very obstinate when she likes."

Rettie was the only person in Hyben of whom William and Simon stood in fear. She was spare, tall and angular, exceedingly erect, and was always dressed in quaker-like blue dungaree. Her quick, deep voice, her coffin-shaped face, and calm, light-blue eyes gave one the impression of unobtrusive and deep-rooted austerity. She thought much and said little, but occasionally, in her anger, her face and words would take the nerve from the boldest of the inhabitants. The mere sight of her always shook the school children as if they had seen a ghost; and more than a remnant of this im-

pression remained in that part of the younger generation who had grown to men and women in the baleful light of her eye. Such, then, was Rettie, who ruled the house of William and Simon, and William and Simon with it. In the forge and in the field William and Simon were allowed a free hand, but anything pertaining to domestic matters was settled for them ruthlessly. On the question of food and drink Rettie was omnipotent. In the matter of home-brewed beer, for instance, William and Simon thought her particularly stingy, for unfortunately for them their allowance was, to a great extent, regulated by Rettie's feelings. Though open complaint was out of the question, William and Simon, when she was particularly stingy, would give way to strange mutterings of discontent.

Such was the case on a particular morning when William and his partner were about to set off to one of their fields a couple of miles away for a day's hoeing of the mangel.

"You may 'pend upon it, Simon," said William when they reached the privacy of the forge, "our old gal's as cross as pison this morning. Never a good word for nobody, and 'pend upon it had to sew my own trouser button on for myself. She thinks two quarts is enough for two men in the field all day. Well, well, to be sure."

"Is that all?" said Simon slowly and reflectively.

Rettie's tyranny was rankling sore in William's breast.

"Picks up the paper, and ain't got no need to read down the column. There it is in the heading. Soo-e-cide of a poor man through a wooman, and who can wonder at it? She's as cross as pison this morning."

"Got t'other half-gallon jar?" said the practical Simon.

"Yes, here's the full un, and here's t'other, empty."

"Put empty un under coat till we gets along the lane, and then hide un in the hedge. One of us can slip back in the day, and get un out of the hedge and have un filled at the 'Yew Tree.' " And so it was settled. One difficulty in the scheme had, however, been overlooked by William and Simon: the forge lay between the field and the "Yew Tree," and some ingenuity would be require to pass by without being seen, and from this fact sprang developments as yet unthought of.

The day was hot, and not many hours had gone by before serious inroads had been made on the half gallon of home-brewed, and presently William said: "Simon, I'll go down and get t'other half gallon."

"Take this here hoe over your shoulder in case you happens to meet Rettie. She'll think you've been down to sharpen it," said Simon; and William immediately fell in with the subtle suggestion.

At the start all went well with William's jour-

ney. He hurried down to the "Yew Tree," obtained the half gallon of beer, corked it up securely, and then with the hoe in one hand and the jar of beer in the other set off on the way back to the field. Then he came into contact with Phil Carey. Phil was on his way from Lawn Farm to fetch the cows for the afternoon milking, and he turned into the road some twenty yards behind William and followed leisurely in his wake, casually wondering at William's unusual furtiveness and his unusual haste. Very soon his curiosity was satisfied. William had reached a spot opposite the back of the forge, and having now nearly passed the danger zone was thinking how well he had managed everything, when he suddenly received a great shock. In the grass-grown lane from the forge, coming in his direction, was Rettie, the top of her sun-bonnet just visible above the intervening hedges as she strode along. William was in trepidation. The jar in his hand told his errand but too plainly, and he looked

eagerly on each side of the road to see if the hedges offered any chance of concealment, finding to his disappointment that just here they were particularly scanty. He had given himself up for lost, when Phil came to the rescue.

"Let me help you with that jar," he said. "I'm going along the road. I know one gets tired carrying a thing a mile or two without a rest."

William was surprised, but the case was urgent.

"Thankee, young Carey, thankee. Don't mind if ye do. This here hoe gets a bit in the way."

A few seconds later Rettie came round the corner like a ship in full sail. She found Phil carrying a jar of beer, and William plodding a few yards behind nursing his hoe. Rettie did not connect the couple in any way. She stopped William with a gruff exclamation, and asked the time he and Simon would be home.

"Time for tea, missus, time for tea," said William as he hurried on, afraid that she might make enquiries less easy to answer. A minute later

William took the jar from Phil, and gave him a word of thanks.

"Hears you Careys be in a pretty muddle one way and another," he went on.

"Dear me," said Phil, "that is remarkable, I have not heard of it."

"Ah," said William, "course you ain't got the business head of your brother; they don't tell you everything. From what I hears you ain't much good at business."

"That is so," said Phil in bantering seriousness. "The spirit is willing, you know, but the flesh is weak."

"But surely a young fellow like you ought to be taking his coat off at something, not hanging about his mother or his brother. How old might you be, young Carey?"

"Twenty-one, William; the gay and festive twenty-one."

"Twenty-one! Well, to be sure. Shouldn't have thought it. 'Pend upon it, you ought to be

away at something. From what I can hear your brother will want all the help he can get. Course they lets you jog about the ground at one thing and another, but it's only to keep you out of mischief."

"Mischief?" said Phil, making a frail attempt at a joke. "You don't suspect me of mischief at my age?"

William looked up at him suddenly, as if the remark had brought something to his memory. "If you ain't been up to mischief lately, somebody have. How was it the garden-gate of the Vicarage was found in our pond? And there's that little job of our own. Three nights running somebody have come and knocked at our door and run away. Both Simon and me have kept watch and have never been able to find out who done it, but whoever it was he'll repent it, you may lay your soul to that. Let un come again, that's all. There's a stake against the door-post as thick as your wrist, and sure as there's a Providence he'll

have it right athirt his head, that he will;" and William looked at Phil warningly.

Phil laughed. "Let's hope you'll catch him," he said.

"By the way, young Carey, there's one thing you might tell me, if ye can. I hears your brother is going to give up Brierley's old farm, or if he don't Brierley is going to take it away from him. Might as well have the rights of it now I be a-talking to ye."

"What a ridiculous rumour!" said Phil. "So far as I know, Dick has not the slightest intention of giving up any part of the farm."

"Then take it from me that it ain't so reedeeclus as it looks. Farm Brierley means to make him part with it. Zachy is a terrible gossip."

That night Rettie gave Simon and William her opinion of Phil Carey.

"Idle young scamp," said she, "lounging about the roads doing nothing, while his mother and brother is working their fingers off to make things

pay. Everybody down on them, and they a-struggling, and here's this here young raganapes striding about doing a bit of work maybe once a week. Met un this afternoon (if you had had your eyes open, William, you'd have seen un, too). There he was, with a jar of beer under his arm. Fine thing for he to be fetching beer, and a-swilling of it, I expect, all the while he ought to be at work. You may 'pend upon it I was a good mind to tell un of it when I met un this afternoon, only I was in a hurry."

CHAPTER IX

PHIL TELLS DICK THE OPINION OF THE VILLAGE

PHIL reached home at tea time, and found his mother in a shining white apron busily cutting bread and butter, and Dick on his knees in front of the fire blackening a muffin against the bars in his laughter at Bob. That gentleman with great gravity was fondling the cat, who, not altogether relishing his attentions, occasionally dug the claws of one paw deep into the side of his face.

Phil was unusually serious, for William's information was but the cap to other items that he had heard before. For the first time he was seized with the impression that things were not as

they should be in the affairs of the Carey family. He saw himself the bearer of bad and unsuspected news, and from the height of his knowledge he looked on the cheerfulness of his mother and the merriment of Dick with a kind of pity. "Old Dick little knows what's hanging over him," he said to himself. Then he rushed headlong into his conversation with William, and told the blacksmith's remarks with minuteness from start to climax. Dick and his mother showed no sign of surprise. Dick gave an ear to what his brother said, but could not forbear the temptation of now and then pricking Bob with the toasting-fork in order to give a helping hand to poor puss; and Mrs. Carey, though she listened with interest, went on cutting thin bread and butter undisturbed, except for an occasional smile at William's mannerisms.

"I am glad old William has come round far enough to speak to one of the family again," said Dick; "he's not a bad sort when you know him."

"But what about this talk of Brierley? It seems to me you think it doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters. But this isn't new. For months past it has been quite plain that Brierley has lost his friendliness. Oh, yes, he'll foreclose as sure as a gun. I don't believe he'll foreclose yet, but he will later on; twelve months from now I put it. He's got no less than six young heifers coming along, and those two-year-old colts he is keeping to break in instead of selling them, and he is adding to his stock in other directions. More stock means more land, and where's he going to get it, Phil, where's he going to get it?"

"Why should he foreclose? You pay the interest and farm the land well."

"He doesn't like me. My character is doubtful. I am an undesirable. Of course it's just possible he really wants to enlarge his own farm. Most likely it will be a combination of both ideas that will lead to the foreclosure, if it comes."

"I am sure," said Mrs. Carey, "that all this is

idle village talk, nothing more. Now, boys, draw up; your tea's ready."

"Dick," said Mrs. Carey after tea, just as her sons were going out, "what are we going to do if Brierley does foreclose?"

"We still have the thirty-acre farm and the homestead. They are our own."

"Thirty acres will be very different from a hundred and ten."

"Yes, but we shall get through all right. We shall be able to keep the fowls and the pigs, though I'm afraid the cows will have to go. Won't be any grass land left for them, you see. I must sack the men, and Phil and I must do what work is necessary. I really believe that if the worst comes we shall be just as well off, and shan't have so much to worry about."

Dick's words rang full of spirit, but he was acting a part for once, and he alone knew how hollow his prophecy might prove. The foreclosure was the great enemy. Land was high when

the mortgage was arranged, and now land was low, very low indeed. For years the Careys had struggled to pay instalments off the original mortgage, and the debt had been lowered by some hundreds of pounds. Here came in the evil, and Dick saw it plainly. If now land were sold to meet Mr. Brierley's demand it might not bring in enough to pay what was due, in spite of the reduction in the amount. Dick shuddered to think of what sacrifices would then be called for; perhaps the other portion of the farm; the old farmhouse itself might have to go. And the thought that his mother, with everything belonging to herself and him, would have to leave the home of his boyhood gave his reflections a bitter flavour. He was in no mood for sweet words when he joined Phil in the farm outhouses.

"You don't think much harm will come of the business, then?" said Phil.

"On the contrary, I fear very great harm will come of it."

"But just now——"

"Indoors," said Dick, "it will be best, now and in the future, to see the brighter side. Out here we face the truth."

And then Dick told tersely the whole of the story.

"Have you got the grit," said Dick finally, "to stop and work with me as hard as a labourer?"

"I should rather think I have," said Phil. "Now you'll see whether or not I've got any stamina. I have only been waiting to show you what I could do."

"The occasion has not yet come," said Dick. "Let's hope it won't."

"I almost hope it will," said the enthusiastic Phil.

"In that case," said Dick, "we may be sold up, farm and home."

Phil was sobered, and he proceeded to stir together in the mixing-tub the skim milk from several pails and a bushel or two of sharps and mid-

dlings, in order to provide the evening meal for the now beseeching pigs. He had brought the mixture to a creamy consistency before he spoke.

"Dick," he said, "I believe I've had a good deal to do with your getting into this plight."

"What nonsense! Why, everybody in the village likes you, whereas they glance at me sideways and talk of me behind my back."

"I mean that my rackety ways have made people think that the Careys are no better than they ought to be. Oh, I can see it well; it's no use your talking."

"You make a mistake, Phil. Eight or nine months ago, before you came home, we had begun to go down in the estimation of Hyben. People got the idea we were making a bigger show of prosperity than we ought, goodness knows for what reason, and William only voiced the feelings of the village."

"Upon my word," said Phil, "they're a nice lot

for simple-minded rustics. Do you know you have been knocked off the flower-show committee?"

"Oh, have I? When did you hear that?"

"Yesterday. Farmer Tree told me that Brierley, with one or two others, has agreed to suggest that you should not be asked to attend the meetings this year as you have so much to claim your attention elsewhere."

"Very kind," said Dick, his colour rising.

"Yes, and more than that, they reckoned that they wouldn't call on you for your guinea subscription this year, seeing how matters stood with you."

"You don't mean that?"

"Yes, it's right enough. And down at the 'Yew Tree' last night there were hints, and more than hints, that Lawn Farm would see a sale shortly."

"Hints were there?"

"Yes. I didn't pay much attention then, but

what I've heard to-day from William, and what you have just told me, makes me think a bit. I pretended, more out of curiosity than anything else, to be pretty far gone in drink. Through that I heard a good many things. Jim Weale, the pig dealer, and two or three others were actually estimating what they would buy when the stock here was sold. Jim Weale says he means to have the two Alderneys, and Zachy is going to get hold of the two heifers."

"I'll drown 'em first," said Dick. "I always knew Zachy to be an artful old beggar. It's the gossip from him about Brierley that has set this ball rolling."

"Ted Prince, the thatcher, wants the hayrake and the garden roller."

"They seem to have gone into the matter pretty thoroughly. Was there anything else?"

"Oh, lots of things; you know how these country fellows run on. Your name cropped up again a little later. They were talking about the parish

meeting to-night. You know there are to be great ructions."

"No, I didn't know it."

"No, of course not; you weren't there last time. Curtain and his lot defied old Brierley, who was in the chair, and there was a pretty how-de-do. It was all about the appointment of a parish overseer. Curtain objected to what he called the secret nomination of a man by the chairman, and when old Brierley called him to order Curtain and his followers became noisy and abusive. There was a fearful wrangle for over an hour. The children out in the road gathered round the vestry windows to listen to the slanging."

"And they expect a repetition of the row to-night?"

"Yes, that's the idea. In the 'Yew Tree' fellows were reckoning up forces so as to know the strength of their respective sides, if it comes to voting to-night. Tom Clarke said: 'What about Dick Carey?' but two or three at once sung

out: 'You wouldn't be there; you weren't there last time; hadn't got the courage to face 'em all, and it was a dead certainty you wouldn't turn up to-night.' "

"Thought I was afraid of meeting them?" said Dick.

"Yes, that's what it came to. But you mustn't go and think that every one was against you. A good many said they really couldn't help pitying you."

"Pitied me," said Dick with sudden fury. "Be damned to them all!"

Dick left Phil to ladle out leisurely the pigs' food into the buckets, and to tramp to the respective styes with it, while he, with sudden energy, began to clean the pony, after which he gave her fresh bedding, cut up a couple of hundred-weight of swede turnips for the cows, and tied up two trusses of hay and brought them from the rick into the buildings. When he had finished, the perspiration stood in little globules across the top

of his forehead. The pigs had finished the major portion of their meal and had swarmed into the troughs to lick up the last drop. Phil was sweeping up some of the middlings he had spilled on the floor of the outhouse.

"Phil, will you look after the pony for me to-night? I have made up a sieveful of oats for her, and there is a bucket of water in the empty stall. And you might have a look in to see how old Charlotte is getting on with her calf during the evening. Another bran mash, about eight o'clock, wouldn't hurt her."

"All right, old man, I'll do it, of course; but what's up? You're generally so beastly particular that you won't let anybody help you."

"I want you to do it for me to-night, as I shan't be home till late. I am going up to the parish meeting."

CHAPTER X

THE PARISH MEETING

THE time for the parish meeting was but ten minutes distant, and scattered along by the churchyard wall, or hanging over the swing-gates, were a dozen or more of the parishioners, mostly farming folk, marked in their various grades by attire ranging from the heavy Sunday black to the well-brushed corduroy. But among the gathering were one or two who had nothing to do with farming work, and of these was Mr. Curtain who, having made two or three thousand pounds in Portsmouth in the speculative building line, had now retired to quiet Hyben, where he hoped to find that recognition of his personal importance

which he felt to be his due. He had become extremely jealous of the standing Mr. Brierley possessed among the villagers, and sought in all ways to break down the idolatry of respect that surrounded him. Here lay the secret of the disturbances at the parish meeting.

Mr. Curtain was forcibly giving his opinions to two or three of his followers, who smoked as they listened, and every now and then gave nods of approval. The upholders of Mr. Brierley gave but a covert hearing to the words of the iconoclastic Curtain, contenting themselves with a desultory conversation on the weather, the price of calves, and the price of corn. As Dick Carey came round the corner of the road by Farmer Twin's barn and walked briskly towards the church, all eyes were turned on him, and Bill Trigley, knocking the ashes from his pipe on the top of the gatepost, mentioned, in an undertone, that he "should have thought young Dick Carey, seeing as how he was placed, would have found

enough to do without troubling about the parish meeting;" an opinion which was endorsed by Farmer Butnill, who, seated on the churchyard wall, remarked that "if he set about paying his debts instead of making hisself out to be so big it would be more to the mark, than his coming to a meeting where he was no account and nobody took no notice of him."

Though conscious of hidden criticism Dick strode up in apparent indifference, and returning a perfunctory nod here and there took up a position of voluntary isolation against the creased and ruptured trunk of the yew tree guarding the church porch. He wished to escape general notice, but his policy had exactly the opposite result, and other parishioners continuing to arrive he found himself the butt for the glances of a considerable gathering. Eventually the fusillade of looks became too strong for him, and he sought refuge in conversation with young Jack Rimmer, the newcomer at the Mesh Farm. In the midst of details

as to the suitability of the Mesh Farm for root crops Mr. Brierley came up in his pony-trap, and the talk was suspended. A general touching of hats ensued as Mr. Brierley jumped down, and the whole assembly began to tend towards the vestry. Dick was the last to move. In the trap was Nellie Brierley, and with her was the Reverend Furlong, curate of Hyben, a fair-haired young fellow, who often visited the Brierleys on account, so it was said, of his acquaintanceship with Bert Brierley, with whom he had been at Cambridge. Dick was not pleased to see that the curate had hold of the reins. "Thinks he can drive. Should like to see him behind that colt I'm breaking in," ran Dick's crude thoughts. "The colt would take some of the starch out of him." But despite Dick's sneers the curate showed no trace of awkwardness in turning the pony round for the homeward journey, a fact that increased Dick's prejudice against him. Dick felt hurt; and while he was wondering what could be the cause, it came

upon him with a pang that Nellie Brierley had not acknowledged him; she could hardly have failed to see him. Dick gave her father the blame, and Mr. Curtain came near to gaining another supporter.

Mr. Brierley threw a few casual "good evenings" around him while the parishioners found their seats. People continued to come in, and very soon the little vestry was crowded, and the chairs, which had been placed across the room in rows, were forced out of their regularity by the crush. In some cases three parishioners shared two chairs between them, others found a resting place on the wedge-shaped window sills, but the larger number of the late comers had to remain standing huddled together round the sides or at the back of the cluster of seats. Mr. Brierley sat at a little baize-covered table, pen, ink and paper before him, and a big brass candlestick on each side. Brackets with candles in them jutted at intervals from the grey walls, although, as there

was still an hour of daylight, the candles were lifeless, and stood but as mute reminders of protracted discussions in the past.

The rising of Mr. Brierley brought about comparative silence. Mr. Curtain, who sat in the front row close to the chairman's table, was prepared to hear that Mr. Brierley had taken some decisive action with regard to the appointment of the overseer, and had primed his followers for an immediate protest. But a surprise was awaiting him and the whole of the meeting.

"Gentlemen, before we begin the ordinary business," said Mr. Brierley, "I have to bring before your notice a letter received from the vicar. It is addressed to me as chairman, and remarks on the disorderly conduct on the occasion of the last meeting. I will read it:

"DEAR SIR: To my regret I learn that at the last parish meeting, which was held in the vestry, there occurred a scene most unfitted for the inside

of a church. The proceedings appear to have been scandalous, and in my opinion brought disgrace on most of those who participated. I am taking measures to induce the bishop to forbid the use of the vestry for future meetings. I cannot express to you how strongly I feel on this subject, and I should be glad if you would make my views known at the coming meeting. At the same time I recognise that you personally are in no way to blame, and that it was only through your efforts the trouble was no worse.

"Yours very faithfully,

"JOHN EMBLEM."

Instantly a noisy hubbub rose among Mr. Curtain's supporters, for it was well-known that Mr. Brierley was a friend of the vicar. Indeed, the whole gathering was somewhat nettled. The statement that the meeting was noisy on the last occasion was quite true, but who was the vicar to complain about it? For the time the ingrained

respect of the parishioners was lost in the feeling that their rights and liberties were in danger. Open rebellion followed surprise. Farmer Tree was the first on his feet.

"What I says is this, sir, that the vicar goes farther than he ought. Whether he wrote it hisself, or whether someone wrote it for un, the letter had no business to have been written at all. I don't see how he can turn us out of this here vestry, and if can let un come and do it."

This defiant oration brought forth a crash of handclapping. Then Mr. Curtain rose in his wrath. "I, for one, Mr. Chairman, don't intend to be bullied by the vicar or anyone else. The vicar and you may be very thick, Mr. Chairman——"

"Order, order," said Mr. Brierley, rapping the table sharply with his pencil.

"You may horder, horder, as much as you like ('Hear, hear; hear, hear,' from Mr. Curtain's followers), but I have got a right to say what I

like." ("Order, order," from the supporters of the chairman.)

"I propose," went on Mr. Curtain, "that we send a letter of protest to the vicar, and tell him——"

"This is not in order," said Mr. Brierley. "I can't allow it."

A voice: "I reckon you wrote it yourself."

Mr. Brierley with dignity: "Order, order."

"You ain't reading the lessons now," said Mr. Curtain.

"Order, order. I'll not have this levity."

"Go hon," said the irreverent Curtain.

"This here letter," said Farmer Tree, when quiet had come again, "is a hinsult to this here meeting."

"I suggest," said Mr. Curtain, "that the chairman write to the vicar and tell him to mind his own business."

Then the noise recommenced, and the Brierley party called loudly for the chairman to proceed

with the ordinary business, but the Curtainites were in the majority, and continuous interjections prevented the chairman from giving effect to the advice.

Dick sat silent through everything, taking little notice of what was going on, his thoughts being on the curate and Nellie Brierley. He had seen them together before, but their familiarity came upon him to-day as a shock. He wondered at his feelings, and repelling the consciousness of Nellie Brierley's influence and the thought of jealousy, he told himself there was something in the curate's face he disliked by intuition. He remembered now that Nellie Brierley was flushed, and he asked himself the reason. Had Furlong pleased her with some compliment? And then the memory of Nellie's clear-cut face, with her dark hair trailing slightly over one ear, and her eyes with their unreadable depths, drove petty troubles and logical ideas in headlong rout. He gave himself up to the enjoyment of the picture till some chance

word from the meeting shattered it. Incoherent thoughts about the mortgage rushed upon him, and, curiously enough, an overwhelming curiosity as to whether the newcomers at the Lawn Farm would plough up the meadow by the side of the house where as a boy he used to play cricket.

But even Dick was at length aroused by the increasing emphasis and vigour of Mr. Curtain's supporters. They were paying no attention to Mr. Brierley's appeals and demands for quiet. Wild suggestions came from all parts of the meeting as to what should be done to meet the case, the suggestions ranging from a serenade of rough music, to a petition to the bishop for a new vicar. Dick felt genuine pity at Mr. Brierley's obvious distress, and tried to quiet the more clamorous of his neighbours, being impatiently rebuffed for his pains.

Then in one of the lulls Dick caught the sound of a voice that startled him. He told himself he must have been mistaken. But no, the assembly,

now rather ashamed of its loquacity, quietened down to listen, and, to Dick's horror and amazement, on turning round he found his ear had told him true, and that the speaker was none other than his brother. Yes, Phil, forgetful of the needs of the pony and old Charlotte, had determined that his brother should not be alone at the meeting, and had come to support him. Convinced that Dick must be antagonistic to Mr. Brierley, Phil had enthusiastically thrown in his lot with the Curtainites, and he had been prolific in schemes of punishment for the offending vicar. He was standing on a chair, his face was red, and he was speaking quickly but distinctly. With dismay Dick saw he had been drinking.

"I have, Mr. Chairman, a proposal to make which I am sure you will consider in order, and which will, I am sure, meet the feelings of most of those attending the meeting. Next Wednesday is the day for the payment of the tithes, and since the vicar has been very free in insulting those

from whom he gets his living I suggest we punish him in a material way by deducting some of his tithes."

("Hear, hear," and laughter.) "Yes, gentlemen, that's the way to touch 'em home. They can stand anything but a rush on their pockets. What if we fine him so much for this letter, and inform him of our decision, and then fine him so much more for every insulting remark he makes about our decision in respect of the matter?"

The chairman knocked the table violently, and shouted for order, but his voice was drowned in the cries of "Go on, go on." Dick, almost beside himself, struggled to get near his brother and pull him off his chair, but those around, half in joke, half in earnest, overcame Dick by weight of numbers, and forcibly held him till Phil had finished speaking.

"Yes," said Phil, swelling under the applauding laughter, "I have known cases in which this system has been tried, and has met with marked

success. At one part of a hilly career I served in a big business establishment, and there were times when the attitude of the proprietor towards his servants became intolerable. So we arranged a scale of fines. For a cross look he had to pay a shilling, for a complaint five shillings, for an oath ten shillings. Of course he didn't know he was being punished, but the comforting knowledge was ours, and it solaced us for what we endured. Personally I was taken somewhat at a disadvantage," said Phil with a touch of mournfulness. "Just before I left, his offences were particularly heavy, and, will you believe it, that man owes me thirty-five pounds to this day."

CHAPTER XI

AFTER THE MEETING

CARELESS of the subsequent proceedings Dick Carey, brimming with mortification and anger, struggled through the crowd to the door. He was desperate. Those in his path were shouldered aside roughly, and he received more than one black look as he pushed towards the exit. Bill Trigley was leaning against the doorpost, and in an unlucky moment he ventured on what he thought was an innocent pleasantry.

"Didn't know Phil could talk like that," he said with a grin. "A drop of beer do set him up, don't it?"

Bill Trigley, unknown to himself, was barring

Dick's egress, and Dick maddened by his words took the opportunity this offered. He seized the young dealer by the wrist and coat-collar, and with a spinning throw, learned in his school days, sent him stumbling and staggering across the gravel path until, with a sharp crack, his head came in contact with the ruptured yew. For the moment Dick felt a keen satisfaction, which was not in the least lessened by the threatening gestures and the bestial oaths of the roughly used dealer. He was even exhilarated by the thought that the irate Bill Trigley might retaliate, but Bill's revenge stopped short of physical violence; words were his only weapons. With a descending spirit Dick walked towards the gate. The scene at the meeting came back to him, and he saw that the reputation of the Careys was gone forever. He was filled with gloomy resentment: resentment at the mad-brained Phil, resentment at the goody Mr. Brierley, resentment at the crowd of fools in the meeting. By heaven! how he de-

spised them all! He knew them so well, he could gauge so exactly their habit of mind, their rustic assurance, and their sheep-like point of view. Brierley disliked him because his half-education had raised him a trifle beyond the pig dealers and tenant farmers; and the row with the blacksmiths and Phil's foolish pranks had jumped with Mr. Brierley's inclinations, and the gentleman farmer had told himself and other people that the inherent coarseness of the Careys was bound to show in time. As for the crowd, Curtainites as well as followers of Mr. Brierley, all of them with a hazy impression that the Careys were somewhat "superior," were glad to see the brothers humbled. In his rage Dick recognized himself as three times the better man of any of the crew that affected to despise him. He could have trampled the lot of them under his feet.

And then as Dick opened the churchyard gate and stepped into the road he saw Mr. Brierley's trap in waiting, with Nellie and the curate in

conversation. Dick saw the curate throw him a coldly curious look. So this miserable puppy also had been primed with the current gossip. That look from the curate was the last straw. Dick set his teeth hard, walked into the middle of the road, and passed within a couple of yards of the trap, without once glancing at the occupants. This pretty pair should see he cared nought, at least, for their opinion. In his scorn he could have laughed in their faces. Then he walked off down the road at a rate which in ordinary times would have shaken the devil out of him in about two hundred yards. His resentment was now far too stable for any exercise to touch it.

The memory of the meeting alternated with the thought of Nellie Brierley and the curate. With a sneer he banished all the silly fanciful hopes to which he had sometimes given way. He realized in his bitterness that he was but one of the crowd. Dick saw the enormous chasm between associa-

tion with curates and with farmers who worked with their hands. He had been in a stupid dream, he told himself.

So engrossed was Dick that he had nearly completed the two-mile walk to Lawn Farm before he noticed, some few yards ahead of him, Bob engaged in play with Nellie Brierley's little fox-terrier, Tim. A surprising change had come over Bob since his encounter with the baker's dog in defence of Tim. Bob's chivalry had resulted in a tie of sympathy, and though Bob was still austerely indifferent to the general dog society of Hyben, he now made an exception in the case of Tim. Tim's advances were no longer repulsed, but were met with dignified acquiescence, and sometimes Bob would so far forget himself as to romp merrily with the little fox-terrier. The acquaintanceship progressed and eventually a sort of partnership sprang up, and Bob on one or two occasions had actually been discovered paying surreptitious visits to the Brierleys' house in or-

der to meet his diminutive friend. It was even suspected that they went on poaching expeditions together, Tim ferreting through the furze and bracken, while Bob walked slowly on the outskirts ready to snap up the rabbit sent out by his active companion.

Therefore when Bob, who had been waiting near the church, walked with his master into the road, Tim sprang from beneath the trap in joyful greeting, and unseen by Dick the pair had cantered on ahead out of sight. Dick smiled grimly to himself when he saw the dogs, and then he was suddenly taken with a reckless idea. What if he returned Tim to his mistress, met the carriage coming from the vestry, confronting Mr. Brierley, the curate and herself? They would at least see he had no fear of them. Dick was in the mood when thoughts are no sooner made than acted upon, and within a minute he had Tim in his arms, and was retracing his steps along Copse Lane. Dick had not walked far before the trap

came in sight. Mr. Brierley was driving and was talking with a show of much earnestness to the curate. Nellie Brierley was squeezed between them. At sight of Dick the conversation ceased, and Mr. Brierley sat bolt upright and touched the pony with his whip to hurry her pace.

"Recounting the horrible misdeeds of the brothers Carey," said Dick to himself sourly.

When the trap was within a few yards Dick raised his hand as a signal for Mr. Brierley to pull up. Mr. Brierley took no notice of the uplifted hand or of Dick, and looking straight between the pony's ears was about to pass by. The Reverend Mr. Furlong regarded Dick from the corner of his eye, while Nellie, who appeared to find some difficulty with her gloves, did not look up until the trap was on a level with Dick, and then from the glance she gave him Dick might have been a stranger. This was the moment chosen by Tim for darting his head from beneath the shelter of Dick's jacket. His mistress saw

him, and her hand went out impulsively over her father's arm. "Oh, pa," she said, "there's Tim;" and Mr. Brierley brought the pony to a standstill.

Dick had stood like a pillar, cursing the thought that had prompted him to return the dog. Then he came forward carrying Tim, whom he placed in the outstretched arms of Nellie Brierley. Dick was very cool, and congratulated himself on the fact.

"I found Tim following my dog, Miss Brierley, and as I was afraid you would miss him I waited here in order to return him to you."

"Thank you, thank you," broke in Mr. Brierley curtly.

"I am sorry if I have offended," said Dick, still looking at Nellie. Nellie kept her head down.

"There is another matter on which I had not intended to speak to you, but since we have met perhaps it is the better way," went on Mr. Brier-

ley. "I am surprised and pained at what took place at the meeting."

"Yes," said Dick, now on his mettle.

"I believed at one time that you were inclined to follow in your father's footsteps and make yourself respected."

"My family affairs need not be discussed."

"You and your brother," said Mr. Brierley, now thoroughly irritated, "came to break up the meeting."

Dick struggled to keep the coolness on which he had boasted to himself just now. His face was pale, and Mr. Furlong said afterwards that there was wickedness in his eye.

"I have no thought of inflicting on you an explanation."

"None is needed," said Mr. Brierley as he shook the reins and set the pony in a trot.

Dick trudged along after the trap, certain now that nothing but his imagination and his conceit could have ever caused him to believe that Nellie

Brierley had given a second thought to him. A nod of delighted gratitude was all Dick got before her father took the words out of her mouth, and then all her attention was taken up by Tim. In the light of her demeanour Dick saw his foolishness in its naked state. With the trap that was fast receding went all his delicate dreams, and Dick asked himself what right had he, a coarse-handed tiller of the soil, to delicate dreams.

Mr. Brierley and the curate were again conversing—Dick could see that by the way they leaned forward, and the trap had almost reached the blacksmith's corner, when Dick saw Nellie, unnoticed by her companions, look back. How he wondered what she was thinking! Then his heart gave a jump, for he could have sworn that, as the trap turned the corner, he saw the flutter of a tiny handkerchief.

CHAPTER XII

WILLIAM'S OPINION

THE drive home was finished, Mr. Brierley had gone indoors, and in the summer darkness the curate and Nellie were strolling through the orchard and chatting on the events of the evening.

"I suppose," said Nellie, "Dick Carey is very rough and ill-natured and coarse, but I can't help thinking pa is prejudiced against him. Perhaps, after all, he is not so black as he is painted."

"He seems a most ill-conditioned fellow," said Mr. Furlong, "and I don't think there is much doubt that he is conceited. One proof is his unpopularity."

"We hear he is not so prosperous as he was, and you know rats always desert a sinking ship."

"Surely some one would have a good word for him."

"Well, I have; he did me a service once."

"Did he?" said Mr. Furlong, with sudden interest. "When was that?"

"He rescued poor Tim from a deep ditch," said Nellie, smiling. "Besides that, his dog fought a battle-royal, on Tim's behalf, with the baker's dog, and beat him. I thought Bob (that's his name) positively noble at the time. But it was a shocking affair. Have you ever seen a dog-fight, a long one? Oh, it's terrible! Dick Carey was very kind."

"You don't understand these farmer men," said Mr. Furlong. "They are essentially coarse. No brute could have done less than help you in distress. I believe this man is really bad, and of the two I dislike him more than his brother, who is at least good-natured, and whose faults lie on the surface."

Nellie Brierley looked at her companion cov-

ertly, and just the flicker of a smile ran across her face.

"Well, for my part I have a sneaking belief that this wicked young man is not so terrible, after all."

"Look at his behaviour at to-night's meeting."

"Didn't see it," said Nellie, "nor did you."

"But there's your father."

"Pa was much put out. He says he believes Dick Carey took a prominent part in the disturbance, that's all. But there, I daresay he is all pa pictures him. Only I should like to get an unbiassed opinion."

"You take a deal of interest in this young man."

"Do you think so? If I do it's only because he and William are the two interesting people of the village. Both I have heard described as wretches."

"Oh, but William, though gruff, is not insolent, and he is absolutely trustworthy."

"Yes, yes—and, oh, what a splendid idea! Now, William is the only man who really knows Dick Carey, who will give a truly disinterested opinion. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll pronounce Dick Carey an abandoned profligate, or anything else you like, after William has done so. I should like to hear what William thinks of him, I should, indeed."

"I don't think there is much doubt about it, but we can soon settle the question."

"I dislike William at close quarters, but in this case I put my whole trust in him."

"If you're sufficiently interested I can easily find out what he thinks."

"Do. 'Twill be, indeed, a Daniel come to judgment."

Now Mr. Furlong had never yet, in the exercise of his ministerial duties, called upon the blacksmiths, judging, first, that they would not appreciate the attention; and, second, that with Simon's regular attendance at church, and the oc-

casional greeting in road or field from the vicar, their spiritual needs were adequately cared for. So, despite the fact that Mr. Furlong had been in Hyben for a year he knew nothing of the blacksmiths except what he had gathered from hearsay. But now the time had come for personal acquaintance, and the conviction crept upon him slowly that Nellie Brierley had set him a task for which he had no great liking. Nevertheless, there was a touch of consolation in the matter. The curate knew, of course, that Nellie Brierley had no real interest in this unruly clodhopper, but still he was jealous that her attention should be even, for a moment, distracted from himself. He acknowledged that he was selfish, but he craved to monopolise all the thoughts of her leisure. He saw that William's outspoken condemnation of young Carey, carrying conviction by its sincerity, would, at one stroke, kill Nellie's curiosity. The curate laughed to himself at this calculation about so insignificant a factor as Dick Carey, and yet con-

tinued to indulge in it. Make no error, he did not exaggerate the importance of the young farmer; he saw quite plainly through this half-educated rustic, his loutish aspirations, his rebellion against the authority held by Mr. Brierley; but the curate was convinced that Dick Carey, ignorant and foolish, had let his eyes fall too frequently on the attractions of Miss Brierley. The idea was laughable, but Mr. Furlong decided that it would be cruel to allow any show of idle interest by Nellie to swell Dick Carey's foolishness, and inadvisable, for Nellie's sake, that her curiosity should be added to by the young farmer's admiration. And he foresaw that William's rough and certain criticism was to be the salvation of the situation.

With these thoughts in his mind Mr. Furlong, next day, proceeded to pay his first visit to the blacksmith's domain. Now, it must be remembered that the door opening from the house into the front garden had not been unfastened within

the memory of the oldest visitor, all exits and entrances being made by the side-door in Copse Lane.

The curate knocked loud and long at the side-door without receiving any hint that the noise was heard within, and in his impatience and ignorance the Reverend Mr. Furlong walked round to the iron gate in front, which he shook to no purpose. Back he came to the side door, and gave an imposing series of knocks with his walking-stick, and waited for the result. Presently, from the breast-high wall which continued from the side of the house along Copse Lane, there appeared the head and shoulders of William. He looked at the curate, who, to the present, had not seen him, and in a gruffly questioning tone ejaculated: "Well, what is it, young man?"

The curate looked round quickly, and across his mind hurried the thought that William might have had the common politeness to open the door.

"Dropped in to see you, William. I've often thought of calling on you."

"Oh, have you?" said William discouragingly.

"Yes; one likes to have a chat with those one lives with, especially with a man who, like yourself, is well known. Of course every one here talks about you."

"Oh, they do, do they?"

"So I thought I would look in and have ten minutes' chat."

"You may 'pend upon it, young man, you've come here the wrong day for such a job. All our women folk is out to-day. And next time you comes don't get fiddling with our front gate."

"I'm sure I'm very sorry," said the somewhat abashed Mr. Furlong. "I shall know better in future."

"Rettie ain't in, nor more ain't Simon; they're the two you want to see."

"Oh, well, I'll call again another time. I suppose you are all very busy on the farm."

"What do a chap like you from London know about farm work?" said William, who saw with scorn the curate's attempt to talk down to him. "I don't suppose you ever had hold of a fag-hook in your life."

"I can learn," said the Reverend Mr. Furlong, with a smile.

The affability of that smile made William angry, and his answers dwindled down to a curt "can't say," "yes," "no." The curate recognized there was but little chance of reaching his point by roundabout methods, so he determined to come to the matter at once.

"Were you at the meeting the other night, William?"

"No; no loss, neither."

"I'm afraid not, I'm afraid not. There were some really shocking scenes."

"Don't want to be mixed up with none of that truck," said William ambiguously.

"It's a very sad business, of course. I suppose

these young Careys are really at the root of the thing."

"Careys? You mean the young Careys at Lawn Farm?"

"Yes, I think that's the name of their place. They seem to have rather a rough character. Do you think they made the trouble designedly?"

"You seems to know a good deal about it. Perhaps you was there, young feller?"

"Well, I drove up to the meeting——"

"Lookee here, young man, you wasn't inside the place at all. I've heard about it, and it seems to me you're a pretty bright liar. What have ye come here for, pumping about the Careys, and trying to run 'em down? Tell you what, young man, I think you had better be off."

The words came from William at an increasingly rapid rate, and he finished up with a snap. His gaunt, bony face was thrust forward far over the wall, his cold grey eyes were shining unpleasantly. Mr. Furlong did not suspect the

force within the man, and was overcome by it. Muttering something about surprises and rudeness, he drew back a few steps.

William continued to glare at him, but said not another word, and Mr. Furlong slowly, and with as much dignity as he could gather, walked away down the middle of the road.

"Well—I'll—be—danged," said William, and then picking up the digging fork which stood against the adjacent wall, he meditatively took his way to the garden to finish his task of digging up the remainder of the early kidney potatoes.

CHAPTER XIII

NELLIE LOSES INTEREST

MR. FURLONG went home stunned by the freedom which had been displayed towards him by the blacksmith. During his stay in North Hyben Mr. Furlong had found out that, after the vicar, he himself was the most respected person there, that he was beyond criticism; and he had come to take the general homage as a matter of course. Judge, then, of his feelings at William's determined insults. He had heard of the blacksmith's independence, and had sometimes laughed at the tales about him, but it had never entered his head that the curate would be treated as unceremoni-

ously as others. Mr. Furlong's self-respect had suffered exceedingly from the interview, and he was correspondingly severe in his comments. This blacksmith man was filled with jealousy of those above him, and in his illiterate way he sought to make them feel he was as good as they. An unbiassed opinion from him? How ridiculous! Brutes of his class did not form opinions about people; they simply blurted out whatever their pique or jealousy prompted. For the moment Mr. Furlong felt sympathy with Dick Carey. He thought he now understood the reason of the squabble between the two at Harton.

Mr. Furlong went home to tea, and after tea, with his nerves somewhat soothed, he walked round to the Brierleys. Avoiding the front entrance he made his way by the little white wicket at the side of the tennis-court. Through the trees of the orchard he had caught a glimpse of a white dress, which he guessed belonged to no one but Nellie Brierley. He was right. Nellie was

sauntering over the turf with her hands clasped behind her back, a graceful figure entirely in white, lost for the moment in meditation. The curate's heart swelled at the picture she made, and a spirit of exultation filled him as he realised that she would eventually belong to him alone. Mr. Furlong was not unduly vain, nor was he blindly modest. He and Nellie Brierley were, from force of circumstances, constantly in company, he had no rival that he knew, they were fast becoming intimate, and she seemed pleased whenever he appeared. He would have been no ordinary man had he not found hope in these facts; and so Mr. Furlong, in his dreams, waking or sleeping, began to feel a proprietary interest in Nellie Brierley.

She was slowly walking away, her gaze apparently lost in the distance. A thrill took him through and through as he thought that even then she might be thinking of him, and he came behind her quietly, to take her by surprise.

"Deep in thought?" said he, with a smile, as he stepped beside her. "Am I a disturbing influence?"

"I didn't see you come in."

"And are disappointed now that you do see me?"

"The white wicket is very convenient; it saves going right round to the front," she said, with crude evasion.

"I trespass here on your account alone," said the curate, not very well pleased.

"On my account?"

"Yes; I'll tell you all about it. Shall we walk through the orchard?"

"I think I prefer the lawn."

"Just as you like. I have come to tell you that this afternoon I carried out your request."

"I am not aware that I made any request."

"About young Dick Carey, I mean."

"Mr. Carey? What about Mr. Carey?"

"Why, I went to see the blacksmith, as you wished me to."

"I do not understand!" Nellie, in apparent surprise, turned and faced Mr. Furlong. "I assure you I have no particular interest in Mr. Carey. What do you mean?"

Now, this mood of Nellie's was new to Mr. Furlong, and he was puzzled. "You remember, yesterday, we were talking about the Careys, and to-day I went and saw William, the blacksmith."

"But what has William, the blacksmith, to do with me?"

"Surely you remember asking me to find out William's real opinion of young Carey, and promising to abide by it?"

Nellie opened her eyes to their fullest extent, and looked at the Reverend Mr. Furlong with amusement.

"You do not mean to say you took that badinage seriously?"

"I was quite sure you meant it."

"Is that really so? I have to beg your pardon. I was joking, you know. I remember, now, I suggested that when you were calling you should ask this William, who is the ogre of the village, what he thought of this Mr. Carey, who is another ogre. I never thought of you going there on purpose. You took me seriously. Dear me, I am very sorry."

"Well, I must be rather thick-headed. Anyway, I went, and I may as well tell you the result. William is a very much overrated man, which probably arises from the silliness of the labourers whom he overawes by his bullying. He is uncouth and brutal. I had a terrible experience. To begin with, his reception was not very encouraging, and as the interview went on his attitude became worse. When I worked the conversation round to the young Careys and mentioned their behaviour at the meeting he suddenly became violently abusive. He called me a liar,

and told me to go. I am afraid that the sole result of my mission will be to alter your opinion of William."

"No, I do not think you will alter that, and as for the result of your mission, as you call it, I do not care in the least. I cannot think how you came to misunderstand me. I shall have to say good-bye now, for I am going to see Zachy about some rabbits he is to buy for me. Go in and see father. You'll find him somewhere in the house."

And with a nod of farewell Nellie turned through the quickset hedge bounding the orchard, and passing through the adjacent garden between the lines of carrots, onions and cabbages, made her way to Zachy's cottage.

Mr. Furlong had never experienced such stingingly cold treatment. The interview had been almost as unpleasant as the one with William earlier in the day. The only grain of comfort in the whole affair came from the reflection that

he had been wrong in his fancy that Nellie had any curiosity with regard to young Dick Carey; it was evident that he had not a speck of interest for her. But this was poor consolation. She was evidently offended with himself, and wondering about this and her repudiation of her explicit request of the day before, the curate walked toward the white wicket; he was in no temper to adopt Nellie's suggestion and go indoors. But as chance would have it, as he marched into the road he saw coming towards him Mr. Brierley, who was on his way to the pillar-box with some letters.

"Hallo, Frank! Where's Nellie?"

"Oh, she has gone to see Zachy about some rabbits he is buying for her, and as my presence was plainly undesirable during the arrangement of the transaction, I left."

"In the way," laughed Mr. Brierley. "Well, Nellie is not a girl of moods, as a rule, so you must forgive her for once. By the way, I have

a letter," he said, holding out an envelope, "that will interest you a little. I have been thinking a good deal lately about these young Careys and their behaviour. I dislike them as neighbours, and dislike still more the thought that they should be, in any sense, tenants of mine. And in addition, I have long wanted to get the ground under my own control. This outburst of theirs at the meeting yesterday decided me. I have just written to Gorcroft and Allen, at Harton, giving notice of my intention of calling in the mortgage money. There will have to be a sale, and if the money does not reach the amount of the mortgage I shall take the farm in part discharge. It's all I shall get, I expect."

Mr. Furlong put in an acquiescent "yes, yes," but his thoughts were on Nellie, rather than the words of her father.

"I have settled all the details, and I shall be very glad to get rid of entanglements with these fellows."

"Does Nellie know?"

"Yes, I was talking to her about it, and told her my decision half an hour ago. It must have been just before you came in."

CHAPTER XIV

TED CRASLER TAKES OFFENCE

DICK was carting peas. Now, the carting of the peas is an operation that follows the haymaking and comes before the gathering of the wheat, partaking somewhat of the character of each. True, it is a more matter-of-fact pursuit than harvesting proper, but let it not be supposed that pea-cutting and carrying descends in any way to the commonplace of market gardening. For the time being the pea is not a "vegetable"; it is corn—a hard, grey pellet which, undisturbed in its soft, half-grown period, has been allowed to swell and harden until it fills the pod to bursting; until the pod itself is dried to parchment; until the vine is

brown and twisted and shrivelled. And this is the condition when the pea is fit to cut.

And so it came about that one evening Dick Carey and old Charley King walked round the edge of the ten-acre, picking a pod here and there, and putting an occasional pea between their teeth to try the degree of hardness. Then they had to see there were no green patches in the middle of the field, that the whole of the tangled mass was equally ready for the sickle. Nor was this altogether a pleasant task, for old Charley King, a shrewd countryman, skilled in all kinds of country work, from the trimming of a quickset hedge to the thatching of a wheat rick, had a habit of looking on the black side of things, especially at the outset. His words were a corrective to Dick, who was congratulating himself on the possession of a remarkably fine crop of peas.

"These here sow thistles," remarked old Charley, "growing up all over the place through the haam will make the cutting one of the worst jobs

I've known this fifteen year. And there's a powerful sight of grass in among the haam, and I don't believe anybody will start the cutting for less 'an eight shillen a acre."

But old Charley, as was his habit, softened down afterwards, and in walking slowly home, pipe in mouth, he talked with Dick on the prospects of the wheat and barley as they passed the various fields, and finally "allowed there wasn't a finer field of peas in Hyben" than the one they had just left.

Then master and man sank into amicable silence as they walked side by side along the cart-track towards the distant farm. Twilight had come, and over the tops of the trees swarms of gnats, like bunches of smoke, rose and fell with a gentle, undulating motion; bats were swiftly, and without sound, hurrying to and fro, and from the coppice on the right came the indistinct cooing of woodpigeons. The surrounding fields of wheat and clover, and the hedges and woodland

undergrowth, were sending up a damp sweetness, faintly appealing to the sense of smell, as well as to that of touch. Everything was very quiet. Suddenly the strident call of a peacock from a neighbouring farm reverberated over the sleeping country, and echoed and echoed till it was lost in the distance. A belated bee on its way home blundered against Dick's hand, and a scuffling rabbit showed its white tail for an instant as it entered the corn. Dick, without knowing why, was, for the time, at peace and thoroughly happy.

A week later the peas were cut, and in matted bunches lay ready for the carting; and one morning, shortly after six o'clock, see Dick and Charley King and Mark Forday and George Wye preparing the foundations of the pea-rick, an area of faggots surmounted by a scattering of straw. Within an hour the carting was in full swing, old Charley King superintending the work at the rick, Dick in the distant field, three waggons bringing, in turn, their loads to the builders at the home-

stead. In the field Dick Carey was loading each waggon as it arrived, Ted Crasler pitching the peas up to him as the waggon was drawn along the rows. The day wore on, the sun gaining power the while, and the perspiration rolled from the brown faces and hairy arms of the workers. The rick grew bigger, the field was more than half denuded of its crop, and Dick watched with satisfaction the first step towards a realisation of a splendid harvest.

But the day was not to pass without a hitch. To Dick, loading the waggons, the action of Ted Crasler, who fed him, grew slow and exasperating, and though at first Dick thought his impatience had deceived him, he presently found that the boy leading the horses would continually start the waggon before Ted Crasler had lifted the last bunch of peas. Eventually Dick saw the reason of his tardiness. Phil, forgetful that his brother was a teetotaller, had brought up to the field beer sufficient for two, and Ted Crasler, taking ad-

vantage of the fact that Dick confined himself to home-made lemonade, had two glasses of beer instead of one whenever a stoppage was made for drink. When the waggon was loaded Dick took the matter in hand.

"Ted," he said, "you've been drinking too much. Now, you knock off the beer till after dinner. You can have a drop of my lemonade if you get dry."

Ted Crasler was in a frame of mind in which a man takes offence at the suggestion of the slightest deviation from sobriety.

"Who's the worse for drink?" he said; "why, I ain't had no more——"

"It's all right," said Dick. "But it won't hurt you to go without till dinner time."

Ted's temper was rising.

"Well, I'm blowed. You're a blooming fine master, you are."

Dick thought it best to take no notice, and he walked towards the approaching empty waggon.

But the man was now sulky and obstinate. He felt he had a grievance.

"Lookee here, I ain't going to be called tight for nothing. You load your blooming peas yourself. Who be you, I should like to know?"

The waggon was close at hand, and Dick jumped up and joined Phil and prepared to ride with him to the other end of the field. The waggon was about to pass Ted Crasler as he stood leaning on his prong, when he sprang forward and stopped the horses. He was red with passion now.

"Who be you?" he shouted. "Why, everybody knows you be nearly a bankrupt, and that old Brierley is going to sell you up. Who be you, I should like to know?"

Dick, who had not a tame temper even in the best of times, leaped out of the waggon, and went up to him.

"I've had enough of this," he said. "Put on your coat and get home."

"I'll very soon do that. Pay me my money and I'll go for good."

"You shall have your money if you come to the house this evening. In any case I shouldn't keep you on after your impudence."

"Oh, I'll very soon go. Don't be afeard of that." And the independent Ted walked to a recess in the hedge where lay his waistcoat and his dinner-basket, and was very soon on his way off the field.

He had a long distance to cover, and he had walked off at least the outward effects of the drink some time before he reached his cottage. His way lay past the forge, where William, as a great favour, was mending a hay-rake for Mr. Brierley. The blacksmith heard the heavy footsteps approaching, and, according to custom, left the bellows to investigate. Seeing Ted Crasler was wearing his waistcoat and that his rush basket was slung over his shoulder, William waited till he came up.

"Hullo, young Crasler, what are you doing of at this time of day?"

Ted Crasler had by this time convinced himself that he was a much-injured man, and seeing before him a sympathetic listener he proceeded to tell what he had endured at the hands of Dick Carey.

"It's all along of this young Dick Carey," said he, nodding his head in the direction of Lawn Farm.

"Oh, is't?" said William.

"Yes, but I told un, the oozebird. I don't care for the likes of him, you know. I pretty soon told un what's what."

"Pea-carting, ain't he?" said William.

"Yes, and he'll want all the peas he's got, and more, too, to get out of the mess he's in. You've heard as how old Brierley's going to turn him out of the farm?"

"He is, is he?"

William's tone was not nearly as sympathetic

as Ted Crasler would have liked it to be. Indeed, the blacksmith's manner was becoming quite distant.

"Yes, Zachy was a-telling of us last night. Yes, he'll be bundled out of it, and serve un right, too. What do you think he done to-day?"

"Dunno," said William.

"Why, he tried to stop me having any beer; harvest too. I pretty soon showed un he couldn't play about with me. I ups and puts on my things and tells un to load his peas hisself, and I asked un for my money."

Ted paused a moment for effect. William regarded him with motionless face.

"Yes, that I did, and he ain't got enough money to pay me with, and that's the truth."

"Kind of left un in the lurch," said William. "Knowed you could get another job with harvest coming on. Told un what you thought of un now it's all up with un?"

Ted was fired with the thought of his inde-

pendent attitude, and he did not notice the danger signal in William's voice.

"Yes, couldn't stand un no longer, you know, William."

"I suppose you thinks yourself mighty clever, young Crasler."

This was not the sort of appreciation Ted expected.

"No, dunno about being clever," said he, somewhat taken aback.

"You may 'pend upon it, young Ted Crasler," said William, with fierce deliberation, "you're a good-for-nothing lazy skunk."

"Eh?" said the astonished Ted.

"You're getting a bit too artful, young feller. I've heard your character before to-day. You be getting pretty well known in this here place. You may 'pend upon it, if I had been young Carey I should have had something else to say to you; yes, that I should!"

William re-entered the forge, and without so

much as another glance outside started on the mending of Mr. Brierley's hay-rake.

Ted Crasler stood in the roadway, for the moment knocked off his balance by William's outburst, and then without having gained courage for a retort went on his way.

CHAPTER XV

WILLIAM DEMONSTRATES HIS CONSISTENCY.

THE clouds were gathering over the head of Dick Carey. Notice calling in the mortgage money had been received from the Harton solicitors, and the news of Mr. Brierley's action having spread, there came pouring down on Dick requests for payment from all those with whom he had had dealings, and, in addition, he had to encounter a general unwillingness to supply him with the necessaries for carrying on work at the farm. True, there were but few creditors: Wilkins, the seed merchants; Green, the proprietor of the threshing machine; Thoms, the ironmonger, and one or two others; and true, too, that they

had known him for years; but they were frightened, and more than one came over to see Dick, and tried a touch of bullying, until a taste of Dick's temper cured them. Dick found these experiences rasping, but he steadily set his face against raising money on the thirty acres and the homestead, for he wanted a reserve in case the other portion of the farm should not realise enough to settle the debt, in which case the land might fall into the hands of Mr. Brierley, a contingency which Dick obstinately rebelled against. So the peas had to be threshed and sold almost as soon as they were gathered, and the newly formed hay-ricks had to go as well.

Now that Dick knew the worst he was not so despondent, for in the distance he spied a gleam of hope. His crops were in splendid condition; the forty-acre field of wheat promised at least ten sacks to the acre, and the barley and the oats were comparatively as good. Dick dared not reckon up other than in a tentative way, but now

and again he could not prevent the passage of a thought that even if the land did not fetch enough to satisfy Mr. Brierley's claim, the surplus from the harvest might make up the balance. Mr. Brierley's desire to get hold of the land would, after all, be thwarted. Dick watched the ripening corn with eagerness.

Then Dick had cause for pleasure in another matter, which, slight and almost trivial, warmed his heart out of all proportion to its importance. Now that his difficulties had taken definite shape and had shown themselves really serious, his contemners, as a whole, were more outspoken in their expressions of disgust, but there were one or two, who while Dick's troubles were shadowy had passively agreed with the rest, now slid round into the position of tacit sympathisers with the young farmer. They numbered perhaps not more than five all told. Charley King was among the stalwarts. Privately, Dick classed old William with him, for his assault on Ted Crasler

(embroidered and exaggerated) became quickly known throughout Hyben.

Old Charley King who had hitherto half despised his master, had had a glimpse of his real character, and thenceforward there was no more sturdy upholder of his employer's cause. Old Charley was of a taciturn sort, but he had good ears and a quick judgment. When Charley heard of the Ted Crasler incident William's attitude had his silent admiration; the blacksmith was plainly a man after his own heart. Up to the present William and Charley had had but little to say to each other, Charley not being sufficiently docile for more than a nominal acquaintance; but Charley now thought he should like to see this man again, and discuss with him the general piggishness of the village, and he accordingly waited for an opportunity. Down past the forge lay one of Dick Carey's fields, which this year had been devoted to clover. The first crop had been stacked long since, and the second cut

was just in flower. This second cut was not intended for hay, and every afternoon old Charley would go down with the horse and cart and scythe and mow enough of the fodder to provide his horses with a feed during the night. The blacksmiths were often away from the forge now attending to their crops, so though old Charley gave a glance as he went by the place each day, a week passed before he saw William and his partner. Old Charley sat on the shafts of his cart smoking his pipe, the cord reins in his hand, the old mare jogging along contentedly to what she knew was an extra feed of clover. As they approached the forge old Charley heard the clang of the anvil, and he hung the reins on a nail at the side of the cart, and dropped from the shafts to the ground, and proceeded to walk at the horse's head. Then he found an unexpected obstacle. Old Charley discovered his pride too strong to allow him to stop at the forge and speak to William, uninvited, and the difficulty proving insurmountable, he

strode by as usual, and being annoyed with himself did not trouble even to look inside the forge as he passed. He smoked his clay pipe upside down for the rest of the way to the clover field, and hit the old mare viciously when she turned the wrong way on entering the gateway. His annoyance found its own remedy. The blow which he dealt the old mare hurried her pace considerably as she went across the field to the clover, and she had not passed over more than three furrows when the sharp jerks produced an accident: one of the tug chains of the harness broke asunder. For the moment old Charley was more annoyed than ever, and the mare had one or two severe raps with the handle of the whip to make her "keep quiet," though with exactly the opposite result. But finally old Charley was struck by an idea which restored him to good humour. The very thing! Why had he not thought of it before? He would take the tug chain across to William and get him to mend it, and then there

would be an opportunity for an exchange of views, and this might even lead to a formal reconciliation between Dick Carey and the blacksmith. He gave the mare an armful of clover to keep her from straying into that which was still uncut, and then set off across the intervening fields to William's forge. He found the partners preparing to go in to tea, and William had just taken off his leather apron.

"Here's Chawley King," said Simon, as the old carter turned from the roadway towards the forge.

"Hullo, Chawley," said William, looking up.

"This here tug chain have come out," said Charley. "Can you put in a new link for us?"

"Well, to be sure," said William. "How did you manage this?"

"I brought the old mare down here to get some clover, and going over some of the voars the tug broke."

"S'pose we can do the link for Chawley?" said William, to his partner.

"Oh, ah," said Simon affirmatively, though without undue cheerfulness, for he thought of the tea which Rettie had in waiting.

"Charge it to Carey," said Charley.

"Then this here chain is young Carey's?"

"Yes, didn't ye know?"

" 'Pend upon it, Chawley, I forgot who ye was a-working for, that a-did. No, 'pend upon it, Chawley, shan't be able to do it. Can't do nothing for young Dick Carey. Ain't got nothing ag'in you, you know, Chawley, but ain't done no work for these here Careys for twelve months past, or more, and we ain't going to begin now, be we, Simon?"

"No," said the pliable Simon.

"Then ye won't do it?"

"Can't work for these here Careys, Chawley. From all accounts they are a rough lot. Take it over to Larroway, he'll do it for ye. Larroway's the man for you."

And Charley had to go back to the clover field

with his object unattained, and had to make shift with a piece of wire till he reached the farm again.

He met Dick and Phil just as he was entering the stables, and abruptly told them what had occurred. Phil was greatly tickled, but Dick's amusement was tempered with a dash of disappointment, for he had reckoned on William as one of his champions.

"Oh, hang him; the man's as obstinate as a pig. Contradicts for the sake of contradicting."

"He don't care whether he works or not with that box of money under his bed," said old Charley. "He don't want no work."

"Box of money?" said Dick.

"Yes, he never goes to the bank at Harton but once a year, and then he puts in all he has saved up. There's always a pretty good lot in the box under his bed. Oh, I've heerd him say so before now."

"Well, of all the silly old fools," said Phil.

"I wonder," said Dick, "whether the fact that

I owe him twenty-five or thirty shillings has any weight with him. Phil, you might look in, when you are passing, and ask him for his account again."

Accordingly, Phil next day called at the blacksmiths' house, saw William, and presented his request. William was decisive.

"'Pend upon it, young Carey, your brother have had the bill once. We never makes out a bill a second time, not for no one. You've had the bill once and you don't get un no more, even if we never has the money."

And so Phil went home without the bill.

CHAPTER XVI

FRED BULLER'S ANECDOTES

THE grindstone is not a very common thing in the country, and as it is an article required frequently by pretty well every kind of worker, the occasional owner has to make up his mind to a stream of borrowers. Dick had an excellent grindstone—almost a new one—of just that degree between soft and hard that gives a keen, artistic satisfaction to the grinder, and something approaching a razor-edge to the scythe or fag-hook. Consequently, Dick's grindstone had been much sought after, and was used not only by his own men, but by his acquaintances all around. A word at the side-door to Dick or his mother, and

then the visitor, with a boy for the turning of the handle of the grindstone, would pass out by the poultry runs to the meadow, and in two minutes would be hard at work. But, latterly, there had been a falling off in the number of those who came to use the grindstone; the villagers generally transferring their attentions to the small and inferior stone possessed by Zachy. They felt uncomfortable now in seeking favours of Dick Carey. And so, one evening, when Dick came down from the stables after "racking up" the pony, he was agreeably surprised to see the genial Fred Buller coming up the garden path to meet him with a pruning-hook under his arm. The request for the grindstone was no sooner made than granted.

"Come on," said Dick. "I'll turn the handle for you myself."

They made their way to the meadow, and there put upon the pruning-hook an edge, which Fred Buller, after feeling it with his thumb, declared to

be absolutely perfect. Then the grindstone having been washed clean with a liberal rinsing of water, the two fell to talking. Dick felt the friendly gossip a genuine relaxation, and in the end the gardener, as on many occasions, accompanied Dick in to supper.

Supper was over. Dick sat smoking, Phil was lounging on the sofa, Mrs. Carey, in her low easy-chair was sewing, and Fred Buller, with his chair pushed back from the table just so far as to allow his glass of beer to be within easy reach, was rattling away on village topics almost without ceasing. Dick followed the narrative with interest, for the incidents lost nothing in the telling, Fred Buller possessing some quality of humour. Phil sprawled at full length, for the most part amused by what he heard, and occasionally breaking out into a hearty laugh. Mrs. Carey, busy with her needle, sat in quiet pleasure, in the knowledge that the others were happy. Presently the talk went round to William. On this

subject Fred Buller was, of all people, an authority, for Fred Buller's father and old William's father had, in bygone years, been at the same time near neighbours and deadly enemies. William's father had many of the characteristics that afterwards distinguished his son, and Fred Buller's father was a thick-set, obstinate man, quite different from the easy-going Fred. The gardens of the two were separated by a tall hedge. Over the trimming of that hedge there was constant recrimination, each claiming the hedge as his own property, each asserting his right to trim it. Eventually each trimmed his own side of the hedge, though both of them persisted that they had the right to trim both sides. Fred Buller's father was particularly bitter. It is related how, on one occasion, William's father, with recently sharpened fag-hook, set out to trim his side of the hedge, and how old Buller at once made arrangements to checkmate him. He went to the outhouse and found an iron crowbar, and walked

across the garden with it to the hedge, on the other side of which William's father was at work. Never a word said old Buller, but when his enemy lifted his arm for a stroke with the fag-hook he thrust the bar through the hedge so that the sharp edge of the old blacksmith's implement spent itself on the iron. Again and again he repeated the experiment, and to this day people tell of the remarkable language used by William's father on that occasion. But old Buller came off best, for William's father could not, that day, proceed with the trimming of the hedge. Many similar incidents there were, and Fred Buller remembered them all with the keen recollection of a young boy for the grotesque and the sensational.

With the death of the two old men there had come a change. William, though as contradictory and as bitter as his father, to the village generally, yet always remained on good terms with Fred Buller, and was seldom disinclined for a chat with the gardener on a summer evening.

For one thing Fred Buller was unmarried, living alone in his cottage, and quite content with his greenhouses for companions, and William had a kind of respect for the man who could keep free, as he himself had done, from entanglement with women. Then, there was something in Fred's personality that seemed to suit the old blacksmith. Many a friendly talk took place over the hedge which, in years past, had been the cause of such terrible conflicts, and it came to pass, eventually, that William would discuss with Fred Buller the affairs of the parish, and his own household, with almost as much freedom as he would at home. Fred Buller, then, was fully primed with William's qualities and opinions. Fred had no fashionable knack of telling his tales without laughing at them; indeed, he was one of the first to appreciate their good points, and his smothered chuckle, the inevitable forerunner of the climax, helped considerably to a ripe understanding of the story.

"There's one thing about William," said Fred, "and that is, he won't stand an insult from anyone if he can help it."

"Insult?" said Dick; "a contradictory look is enough to set him going."

"Yes," laughed Fred, "you're about right. I was picking the apples off my old Dieuson tree, the other day, when I heard the sound of a gun, and over the top of the houses I could see a puff of smoke coming up from near the forge. 'Hullo,' said I, 'William on rat-shooting again?' But then I couldn't understand it, for evening is the time for rat-shooting, not the middle of the afternoon. But it was all explained later on. William told me about it himself. 'Ye know, Fred,' he said, 'I can't a-bear to have anyone a-chittering or a-chattering round me, to say nothing of being called names. I was in the forge doing a job or two this afternoon, and there was a mees-sel thrush up in the old walnut tree, right above my head. There he was, as soon as I got

out there—"Smut-tee Will, smut-tee Will." I was a-hammering away, and there he was a-calling all the time, "Smut-tee Will, smut-tee Will" as loud as he could. 'Pend upon it, ye know, Fred, couldn't stand an insult like that; so I went up and got the old gun, and the next time he said "smut—" down he came; never said "tee" no more. 'Pend upon it, ye know, Fred, couldn't stand an insult like that.' "

"The man must be mad," said Phil.

"Not a bit of it. He's peculiar, it's true, but there's no sharper man in Hyben. Still, he's got some funny ways. Only yesterday he gave me a terrible warning."

"What was that?" said Dick.

"You know the ordnance survey people have been here for a day or two, measuring, surveying, and going over all the fields and roads. Well, this surveying party has roused William's suspicions, and he has watched them about rather curiously, having an idea that beneath their os-

tensible purpose lay some deep design. He calls them 'Marylebone chaps.' Everybody is a 'Marylebone chap' who doesn't happen to have been born and bred in the country. Yesterday he brought me along a basketful of walnuts, and began telling me about the people. 'Look here,' he said, 'you be running a pretty risk, you be.' 'Why?' I asked. 'What with all these Marylebone chaps about here you'll have trouble if you ain't more careful. I have meant to tell ye of it once or twice. What makes ye take a light to bed with ye at night? I ain't had no light to go to bed as long as I can remember. Never has a light of no kind in the room, winter or summer. There is a good many of these here Marylebone chaps about, and if I was to take a light upstairs with me they'd know I was going to bed, and now they can't tell whether I be upstairs or down. 'Pend upon it if I was to go upstairs with a light these here Marylebone fellows would have the very teeth out of my head. Now, here's you,

Fred, goes to bed each night, and I can see the light shining out of your bedroom right athirt the road. With this here Marylebone lot here, Fred, ye ought to be more careful.' "

Dick and Mrs. Carey laughed heartily at this, and Phil laughed louder than either.

CHAPTER XVII

WILLIAM HEARS A NOISE IN HIS BEDROOM

"And they says toothache is what drives a dog mad; and, well, there I don't wonder at it!"

Such was the remark often made by Simon when, in the course of quiet conversations, there came a reference to toothache, or kindred ills. Simon spoke feelingly. The partners were peculiarly free from physical troubles, and the only ailment which gave pain to either was Simon's intermittent neuralgia, a reminiscence of the days when he suffered periodically from toothache. Simon was almost toothless now, but once in four months, once in six months, sometimes but once a year Simon would be attacked by the enemy.

His sufferings were acute, and with his jaws tied up, Simon went about in a frame of mind as ferocious as that of William at his worst. He did his work as at ordinary times, and the change in him was generally only noticed by William and Rettie. They would provide what simple remedies they could, but for the most part they were content to leave him alone, which was exactly what he desired. During the time the neuralgia had him in its grip, Simon would get very little sleep, and he would wander about the house at night in search of temporary relief, with but small regard for the chance of waking William or Rettie. More than once he had invaded William's bedroom in order to obtain the latter's woollen scarf for a wrap, and on one occasion William had gone so far as to sit up in bed and ask the intruder how he felt. But this proceeding met with Simon's unqualified disapproval, and William never repeated it.

For over a week past Simon had been suffering

from neuralgia, and the blacksmiths' house was accordingly in a state of continual unrest. The attack was particularly untimely, as it made Simon an uncomfortable companion at work; and with harvest coming on there was a bulk of labour in the fields, in addition to a sprinkling of jobs at the forge. Altogether, William's lot was not a happy one just now.

One day the neuralgia had been very bad indeed, so bad that even Simon's fortitude gave way, and he had to give up his work of "sticking" peas in the garden, and go off to one of the outhouses, where he sat in a corner with a sack round his head, the picture of misery. It was an awful afternoon for Simon, and he confessed afterwards that thoughts he should like to mention to the vicar had driven through his head. At tea time Rettie took him a cup of tea, which Simon drank, and from which he seemed to derive a good deal of relief. Later in the evening there was a temporary recurrence of the evil, but on the whole

he was easier. He went to bed about eight o'clock, free from pain, and with a delightful sense of rest about him. But William was not to be deceived by appearances, and he guessed that before the night was out Simon would be tearing about the house mad with pain. William warned Rettie to be prepared.

"Simon have had it over a week," he said, "and you may 'pend upon it he'll have it, as he always do, for ten days, and 'tain't no good his thinking he won't. He won't get no real rest till Sunday."

"I have left some bran in the basin for poultices, and here's wood to light the fire if he wants hot water; so if he comes down, he'll have everything to hand," said Rettie.

"Hope he won't make too much noise," said William. "I didn't sleep none too well last night, and I've got to be up at five, with them mangel wanting a bit more thinning."

"And Simon, he gets up, too, I suppose?"

"Oh, don't wake him if he's asleep," snapped William. After that brother and sister went upstairs to bed.

When William climbed into bed he could hear Simon snoring in the next room, and it was with a feeling of some thankfulness that he prepared himself for the undisturbed rest he had been seeking in vain in past nights. He dropped to sleep almost at once. He slept soundly, and as the time wore on he began to dream. He dreamed there was a thunderstorm. He could hear the rain beating down on the roof. Then came the thunder, first a sharp crack, afterwards a muffled rumble. Finally, William, though not altogether awake, became aware that his dream had some foundation in fact, and then turning wearily from one side to the other, he realised that Simon was roaming about the house under the spur of the neuralgia. He sighed, perhaps as much at his own discomfort as at that of Simon, changed his position, and then sank almost immediately from

half sleep to full sleep. He was roused some minutes later by a fall in his room, as though a chair had been knocked over.

"Is that you, Simon?"

"Yes," was the gruff reply from the shadowy figure at the other end of the room. The tone was forbidding, and with the idea that his partner was in pain and that it would be better to leave him undisturbed, William composed himself once more and had soon forgotten all annoyances in sleep.

Soon after five o'clock William was awake, out of bed, and looking from the window. Over the whole of the country there stretched a layer of mist three feet deep, above it the air was crisp and sparkling. William saw the day was to be a fine one, and eminently suited to the work he would have in hand. Within ten minutes he had made his way downstairs, to find that Rettie was before him and that the kettle was already singing.

"Simon had a bad time last night," said William.

"Didn't hear un."

"Oh, he was all about the house. Came into my room once, and knocked over a chair and woke me up. Let un lay, Rettie, let un lay, and have his sleep out. He can come down in the field afterwards if he's all right."

Rettie signified her approval with another sharp nod, and then proceeded to make the tea, while William helped himself to a slice or two of the fat bacon that stood on the table. The bacon was hardly in his plate before he heard a ponderous foot at the top of the stairs.

"Blowed if he ain't getting up," said William.

"The fool of a man," said Rettie.

Then Simon came in, and with a satisfied look took his seat at the table.

"What made ye get up?" said William discontentedly. "Why didn't ye lay and get some rest?"

"I'm all right this morning, mate," said Simon.

"All right," repeated Rettie in high scorn, "yes, you're all right, with your head swollen, and your jaws all ready to ache again as they have done for this past week, and you with no sleep to speak of for days. Oh, yes, you're all right. You'd be all right if you was dying. Oh, I know you."

Simon bore the attack very good-naturedly, and reached towards the bacon, which already showed marks of William's attention.

"Look here," said William, "you stay and feed the pigs and give the pony a bit of grub, and then turn in again and get a bit of sleep."

"Not I," said Simon. "I'll go down with ye to the field. I'm all right."

William began to feel slightly annoyed.

"What's the good of you talking? Why, you've been up all night tramping about."

"I had the best sleep last night that I've had for a fortnight. This here neuralgia seems entirely gone."

William was somewhat surprised at Simon, for the latter, though he never obtruded his complaints, was generally too straightforward to dissemble, but here he was plainly endeavouring to throw them off the scent. William felt this deceit was out of place.

"What is the good of your going on like this? You was in my room," he growled. "You fell over the chair. And you was downstairs. I heard you moving about. Why, man, you was up and about all over the place."

Simon looked up in astonishment. "What be talking about, mate? I never once got out of bed last night."

"What be lying for, Simon?"

"What be you?" said Simon, in reply.

The questions were asked in perfect amity; they were for the purpose of elucidating the mystery. The mystery remained unexplained till after breakfast, for it would have been an important matter indeed that interfered with the progress

of the blacksmiths' meal. But when it was over, William, who had meanwhile been thinking, said: "You be quite sure you never got out of bed last night, Simon?"

"Certain," said Simon.

"He's right enough, William," said Rettie, joining in, "for the kettle wasn't touched, nor more wasn't the bran I left ready for him."

William turned up the sleeves of his shirt thoughtfully, and then suddenly taken with an idea made for the stairs. He mounted rapidly to his bedroom, and a moment later he called out for Simon and Rettie to come up. They hurried to him.

William was standing at the side of the bed. From beneath the bed he had dragged the wooden box, in a corner of which there was usually to be found a chamois-leather bag, containing the sovereigns of the partners. Several old documents, a bundle of bills and receipts, had been tossed out and lay on the floor. These being out the box

stood empty. William pointed to it, and the others knew what had happened.

"The money's gone?" said Rettie.

"Every farthing," said William.

"How much was there?" said Simon. "About a hundred and eighty pound, wasn't it?"

"A hundred and eighty-five pound, six and ten," said William. "We put in the price of they two porkers last week."

CHAPTER XVIII

AFTER THE ROBBERY.

THE solitary policeman possessed by scattered Hyben lived two miles from the forge, and William, after a short consultation with Rettie and Simon, set off for his abode. It was not difficult for outsiders to know that something was wrong. Old Whelton, seated at the corner of West Lane, cracking stones; Jack Loller, taking a waggon-load of hay to Harton, and Zachy, returning to the farm with some green food for Nellie Brierley's rabbits, were all passed by William on the road, and each one was struck by his unusual haste and preoccupation. William heeded them not. On he went, his mind in a

tangle, the first half minute surmising as to the thief, the next becoming depressed by the sense of loss, and finally buoying himself up with thoughts of vengeance. He found the policeman in the garden picking scarlet runner beans. Somehow William was disappointed in not finding the man of law in his uniform. He would then have felt more certain of redress, for William, having but a vague and shadowy idea of the resources of the police, was prepared to place implicit trust in the power of Rider to catch the thief and restore the money. A few words were enough to tell the story to Rider, who was immediately filled with professional zeal. The basket of beans was taken indoors to Mrs. Rider, with a request that she should finish the work of picking, and very shortly afterwards the policeman, wearing the respected and inspiring uniform, joined William in the road. They walked up to the forge, and Rider there heard the three versions of the story, with variations and repetitions. After examining the

place he went over to Harton to make his report at the station. Then the superintendent took the matter up, and came to Hyben to inspect the scene of the robbery and to hear the story for himself; Rider's official duties, in connection with the matter, were, much to his disappointment, brought to a close. But he, nevertheless, had before him an unofficial but decidedly interesting duty, and before evening had come North Hyben was ringing with the news of the blacksmiths' loss and the mysterious incidents connected with the robbery. Rarely was there such a feast of excitement, and the village made the most of it.

In the evening the usual cluster of farm hands gathered at the cross roads near the village pillar-box. They sat on the top bar of the adjacent meadow railings, their feet on the second bar, their bodies inclined comfortably forward to give them the necessary balance. Most of them were smoking short clay pipes. Each one took an occasional turn in the talking, and collectively they

discussed the stirring topic of the robbery at great length.

"One of these here Harton chaps," said old Ran Rettesworth, "that's who it is. He comes down here after dark, lays in the ditch outside till William goes to bed, and then just walks in the door."

"Didn't William fasten it?" asked a thin youth from the end of the railings.

"Fasten it?" said Ran Rettesworth, in some disgust at the thin youth's ignorance. "Don't ye know they never fastens their side door? They never have done, says William, and they be never going to. All the years his father lived he never bolted or locked that side-door, and William says he ain't going to begin to do it now."

"Looks as if it was somebody who knew the place," said Jim Dornton, as he loaded his pipe afresh from his half-ounce paper of shag, and pressed in the charge with his first finger.

"You can't be certain," said Joe Rinders, from

the centre of the group, "for William is pretty well talked about outside Hyben. Nearly everybody seems to know un."

"Seems to me," said Ted Crasler, who had just come up, "somebody might have done it for spite."

"Did you have any hand in it, Ted?" asked the thin youth, by way of a joke.

Ted Crasler turned very red, and muttered that the thin youth had better be careful what he was saying.

Then spoke Jack Reece who, having evolved from the position of a cowman to that of tenant of some twenty acres, was regarded as something of an authority.

"What could have made the old man so silly as to put his money in a box under his bed? And everybody knowing of it, too. You never hears of any of these here burglars going to anywhere but the bedroom when they wants money. As for me I never puts my money in my bedroom, not me. I always put mine in a little old sack

in the cellar where I keeps the pigs' food. Leastways, that's what I used to do. I have shifted it lately."

The last two sentences were an afterthought, for the old man had suddenly bethought himself that his frankness was not altogether discreet.

"Hullo, here's Dick Carey," said the thin youth.

The party looked up and saw that the thin youth was right. Dick Carey was coming down the road to the pillar-box to post some letters. Silence fell on the gathering, as it always did at the approach of any but an intimate. Dick came up with long strides. His mouth was set firm, his colour was high, and those who knew him would have said he was not in the best of humours. The spectators on the railings said nothing. They had come to know him better now, and though they talked him down behind his back, yet to his face they showed and, indeed, felt a touch of respect. As Dick passed he looked at them carelessly. From here or there he received

a nod or a muttered "good evening," salutations which he quickly returned. Then having posted his letters he turned to go home. Outwardly he was cool and contemptuous, and yet if those who sat watching him could have read his mind, they would have known that Dick Carey, for the first time, had a shadow of fear of them. He was labouring under the shock of discovery. Phil had disappeared.

Surging through his brain was the knowledge that Phil had heard the tale of William's dislike of lights, and with a sinking heart Dick drew conclusions. The blow had staggered Dick. Despising what the village said of him or thought of him, he had hitherto held his head high; he had no reason to be ashamed of anything he had said or done, and people might say their worst. But things would be different now. Dick measured his strength, and there came upon him the conviction that he would not be able to bear the pointing of the finger and the covert whisper for any

length of time. From these thoughts Dick turned to a consideration of the more practical results of his brother's theft, for as the hours went on doubt about Phil's guilt became less and less. Whatever the sum William must be repaid. Nothing must stand in the way of that, and the money should be returned even if it meant the sale of every stick. One hundred and eighty-five pounds was not a great sum, but it might prove just the last straw which breaks the camel's back.

That evening Dick began seriously to reckon his resources. The whole of the stock, the hay and straw unsold, the horses and other animals, the carts and implements, and the stables he had erected; the value of all these things passed before him in review, and the sums were totalled. Then he added a moderate estimate of the worth of the harvest. The final figures showed clearly that the loss of the hundred and eighty-five pounds would make necessary the mortgage of the house and the thirty acres. He realised at the same time

that the size of the amount required would depend firstly on what the big farm fetched; secondly, on the result of the harvest. Hope was not yet gone.

Next day Dick went up to have a look at the forty-acre field of wheat. The level stretch of ripening heads went in some directions as far as the eye could reach, a silky, russety sea, with sweeping undulations where a ripple of wind was touching the surface. The heavy ears, the gallant, strong upright straws seemed to Dick so many friends, and it pleased him to think that they were coming to do what they would to rescue him. The wheat nodded and shook its heads in the sunlight in answer to the thought. Dick went down the cart-track on his way home with his disturbed feelings quieted.

What was now needed was a continuance of fine weather, for the successful gathering of the corn meant much to Dick. The sale of the land would take place in about a month, and to effect

his purpose the corn must then be off the ground. Little time was left, but the men with their scythes were already busy in the oats and barley; indeed, the work of cutting was nearing a finish here. Dick went across to where the "ring-ting," "ring-ting" of the rubber gave notice of the harvesters. Old Charley King was leading the line of scythe-men, and it was to him that Dick spoke.

"Getting on well with it, I see, Charley. When do you think you'll finish?"

"Ben't quite sure, but I should say to-morrow evening at tea time."

"Have you had a look at the wheat lately? I have just come down from the forty-acre, and it seems to me you might take the men and make a start there as soon as you have finished here."

"I was just saying to Walt here that I'd speak to you about it, when I see you a-coming across. We shan't get it in no better state than it is now. All right, Mast Dick, we'll have the fag-hooks

up here, and if we can we'll make a start in the forty-acre in the evening."

The men were in position again now, and very soon there began the steady crescendo of the scythes, "swi-i-eesh, swi-i-eesh." Neither the sound nor the movement of the men was regular, the strokes falling sometimes together, sometimes one after the other, but each blade, quicker or slower, ever carrying its load of corn to the lengthening swath and making music on its way. Dick stood watching the men till they had plodded their way to the top of the field, and with their scythes under their arms had, at a measured, deliberate pace, set out for his end of the field again. Then he started for home.

Matters did not go so smoothly with the cutting of the wheat as Dick had been led to hope. On the second day that the men were in the forty-acre squally clouds began to come from the westward, and the next morning, at daybreak, a steady drizzle was falling. The men at work by the piece

were as anxious as Dick for fine weather, and all day they stood in the outhouses glowering at the falling rain and looking for a break in the clouds. Not a sheaf of wheat was tied that day. The downpour seemed to mark a permanent change in the weather, for thence onward there were not twenty-four consecutive hours that were free from wet, the winds meanwhile being cold and autumnly. Sometimes the harvesters were out for a few hours, sometimes for half a day, but they were often interrupted, for gusty showers were annoyingly frequent. Dick chafed at the delay; it is even to be feared he cursed the westerly wind which was making all the trouble; but the sun had spent its summer force, and was content with showing itself at rare intervals for a few hours at a time. The work of cutting the wheat progressed, it is true, but it progressed slowly, and Dick saw the corn was suffering.

CHAPTER XIX

DICK CAREY VISITS WILLIAM

HYBEN was not long before it missed Phil, and within a day or two the coincidence of his disappearance with the robbery at the blacksmiths' house was noted, and was talked of beneath the breath. At first people did no more than hint, but soon they grew bolder, and expressed their suspicions openly. Within a week Hyben had settled who had stolen the blacksmiths' money. Though Dick heard no word about his brother or the theft, he knew only too well that both were receiving full discussion in all quarters. He grew taciturn to all but his immediate friends, and though he continued to make light of matters to

his mother, he occasionally felt himself almost without hope. He was at a tension, and was kept from collapse only by the knowledge that the climax of the strain was approaching. Sometimes he would look forward to the day of the sale with absolute relief. One way or the other the trouble about the larger farm would then be taken off his hands, and if things went wrong, well, it would be better to make a fresh start, in a humble way, elsewhere, than to live on in Hyben with the village against him. Perhaps, indeed, failure to raise the mortgage money would be better than success. Dick told himself these things in his weak moods only, for in general he faced the coming crisis with boldness, and determined to hold on grimly. Then he would laugh at his previous forebodings.

The last gleam of hope with regard to Phil's innocence was obliterated one afternoon by the receipt of a letter addressed to Mrs. Carey. This was the letter:

"SS. BISON OF THE WEST.

"LIVERPOOL, Wednesday.

"DEAR MATER: I am leaving this letter with an acquaintance at Liverpool, and have asked him not to post it for eight or nine days. This in case of mistakes, for by that time I shall have landed on the other side and shall be on my way to the West. I daresay you think I am an awful blackguard. I suppose I am, but whether you believe me or not, I never meant any harm, mater. When I first took the money I had no more thought of running away with it than Dick had of stealing it. The straits we were in often made me wonder if I couldn't get any money to help you and Dick, but I could never seem to see my way to doing any good. You see, you wanted a good lot to be of service. Then came the day when old William refused to do that bit of work for Charley King, and I heard the tale of the money under his bed. When Fred Buller told us of

William's dislike for lights at night the thought of the money occurred to me at once. I'm going to make the common excuse of all thieves, and, though I don't suppose you'll believe it, it's the absolute truth. I only meant to borrow the money, not to take it for good. For one thing I thought the amount would be larger than it proved to be. My idea was to collar it and to send it to you anonymously. I'd decided that after doing this I'd go to London again, and by hook or by crook would try to get enough to repay old William. I thought if I couldn't get it, well, he must go without it, for he could stand the loss of the money better than you could stand the lack of it. I swear to you, mater, I had no thought of taking the money for myself. But the devil must have a very strong hold on me. As I live, when I had in my hands that chamois-leather bag with the chinking sovereigns inside it I could think of nothing but the delight of possession. The idea of sending the money to you had gone

clean from me. All I thought of a few minutes later was how to get clear away. I walked to Portsmouth, which took me some three hours, and there caught the early train for London. Later in the day I half realised what a fool I had been. Thereupon I laid out some of the money on a horse. It is a curious thing, mater, that, whatever other chaps may have suffered, I have always been very lucky at betting. Many a hole have I got out of by putting half a sovereign on a horse. I hoped now to get enough back to square the blacksmith and a bit over. But luck was out. I lost every penny I had speculated. After that I thought the best thing I could do was to clear right away, and not trouble any more. The money I had left in my pocket would enable me to do this. I could get to America and far out into the Western States, and this would be the best possible investment of the money that I could make on your behalf. You will see that I am aboard, and on my way to carry out my plan. I

think you may put this down as really my last scrape, mater. I shall settle quietly, and, I hope, make a bit of money by honest means. As soon as I have made something of a pile I shall send you and Dick enough to clear up old William's account and all outstanding debts. He will then be able to insult all the devils to their faces, and I hope he'll do it. Good-bye. I'll write you from the other side as soon as I am fixed up.

"Your affectionate son,

"PHIL."

Dick read the letter in varying stages of wonderment, disgust and pity.

"Mad," he said, at last, "stark, staring mad."

Mrs. Carey did not reply. She had taken the letter and was reading it over again.

"The easy way he's going to help us when he's made his fortune, that's what gets over me. He forgets the trouble he has let us in for now. I believe his story is quite true, for it's just what a fellow like him would do. He's not a success as

an honest man, and he's not far from failure as a thief."

Mrs. Carey did not hear him. She stood looking out of the window with her thoughts far away. Presently a big tear gathered on her cheek and slowly trickled down, only to be replaced by another directly afterwards.

"My poor Phil," she said quietly, to herself, "my poor, poor Phil."

And Dick, his thoughts tinged with sadness, saw that his mother realised that she had lost, perhaps for ever, her favourite son. He stole away unmanned by his mother's tears, and he fiercely determined that Phil should be brought back to England, as soon as it was possible, in safety.

Dick found much food for thought in Phil's letter, and before the evening was out he had determined on a course of action. His decision was, perhaps, Quixotic, but he was in the mood to care but little for personal discomfort. If Phil had

gone astray, he told himself, it was necessary that he, Dick, should walk the straighter. Accordingly, without saying anything to his mother, he put on his coat and walked down the road to the forge. Now, William and Simon had no choice but to listen to the gossip of the village, with regard to the theft, but they sternly discouraged reference to the matter. They were pretty well convinced that Phil Carey was the thief, and, curiously enough, this conviction produced a reticence in the matter, even when they were by themselves.

When Rettie went out to William in the back garden, where he had gone to cut some vegetable marrows for the next day's dinner, and told him that Dick Carey was at the side-door and wanted to see him, William was more surprised than he had been for a long time past, but he immediately guessed the object of the visit.

"Let un come in, Ret," said he. "Tell un to come through into the garden here."

This was indeed a mark of high favour. Very few managed to reach the back of the house and to enter William's garden. All that part of the blacksmiths' kingdom which lay behind the forge and cottage was jealously preserved from strangers.

When Dick walked down the garden-path William, still assiduously searching the marrow bine, greeted him almost with heartiness.

"Hullo, Mast Carey. You be just the young feller I was a-wanting to see. Your father was a rare gardener, and he used to grow some fine cucumbers in they their frames of his. I lay you knows something about cucumber-growing, too. Come across and look in this here frame. Now, what have made these here plants go like this?"

William pushed down the top glass of the frame, and showed the cucumber plants which seemed shrivelled and anæmic.

"I should say you haven't kept the frame open

in the heat of the day, and the plants have got literally burnt up."

"Every morning as regular as the clock," said William, "this frame have been opened six inches or more, and have stayed open till evening."

"Well, that's curious," said Dick. "Let's have a look at the leaves. Now I see. Why, you are watering them in the middle of the day, and the steam is scalding them."

"I never waters 'em but early in the morning."

"Perhaps somebody else has watered them."

William thought a moment; then his face lighted.

"That's our Rettie," he said decisively. "You may 'pend upon it our old woman can't let anything alone for a single moment. She told me a week ago she didn't believe these here cucumbers was getting enough water. I told her they had plenty, but you may 'pend upon it she has popped out here in the middle of the day and give 'em

some more. Some of these here women thinks they knows everything."

At any other time Dick would have smiled, but he had serious work on hand now, and he must make a start at once. William's cordiality had rendered his task much easier, but it was still a difficult one.

"William," he said, "I have come down to speak to you about the money you lost."

William shut the cucumber frame, and then, with his elbow on the top corner, stood and listened.

"You know what the village has been saying about it?" went on Dick.

"Don't take much notice of it myself," said William.

"Everybody is saying my brother stole the money."

"These here people here would say anything."

"That may be. But I have just learned, and

that's what brings me down here now, that what they have been saying is true."

"Eh?" said William.

"I have heard from my brother, who has run away, that he did really take the money. I can't say any more about him. What I came down here to tell you was, that it doesn't matter what action you take I shall regard the matter as a debt, and that I hope to pay it off within the next two months. What was the exact amount?"

"The money was a hundred and eighty-five pound, six and ten," said William. "We had put the price of the two porkers in only the week before."

"I have been hoping, William, you won't think it necessary to tell the police what I have said to you about my brother writing to me. It might put them on his track."

"Ain't no need for that," said William gruffly. "Oh, no, ain't no need for that. But I am very much obliged to ye, Mast Carey, for coming

down. There ain't many as would have done it. Oh, no, there ain't no need for that."

William changed the conversation with desperate suddenness.

"How are ye off for marrers at home?"

"Well, it's getting late," said Dick; "I fancy I cut the last a week ago."

"I never had such a fine lot in my life. Got more than ever we shall eat. I have just cut these here two. Beauties, ain't they? Look here, now, ye take 'em home, will ye?"

"You are very kind, William. Thank you very much."

Dick took the marrows, one under each arm.

"That other affair will be all right," said William. "Don't you worry your head about that."

As William took Dick through the kitchen to let him out by the side-door, he made a remark on a different subject.

"We ain't quite so busy at the forge as we have been, lately, and if you wants any of the

hosses shoed send 'em along, and we'll do 'em for ye. Pleased to take on any little job ye wants done, ye know."

CHAPTER XX

THE RISING WATER

At last the wheat was cut, but there the work of harvesting was, for a time, compelled to stop, for the weather gave no chance of carrying or threshing. True, the rain was intermittent, and sometimes a day, sometimes two days, would pass without a sign of wet, but on the third day down it would come again, and never was there an opportunity for the sodden wheat thoroughly to dry; the shocks stretched in long lines across the field, limp and shrunken, their heads bowed. Dick had special reason for annoyance, inasmuch as it was desirable that he should get his crops threshed as soon as possible; but all the farmers of the dis-

trict suffered more or less from the bad weather, for the continual rain was causing the quality of the grain to deteriorate. They watched with apprehension the shortening days and the ever-lengthening distance from summer warmth.

The wind increased in force, and sometimes gusts swept up from the channel, reminding Hyben of the November gales. Then it was that the first shadow of another fear fell upon some of the farmers.

One Thursday morning, after two days of a moderate gale, Farmer Routh and Ran Rettesworth and Dick Carey met each other on the foreshore. They had been drawn thither by the same foreboding. In two days' time the spring tides would be at their height, and if the present strong wind lasted, the sea might, as on previous occasions, break in and flood some of the adjoining fields. Farmer Routh had most to fear. Some of his land was separated from the foreshore only by a narrow strip of turf, which was common

land. On the other side the fields were bounded by Hyben's main road, and the farm land lying somewhat lower than either the strip of turf or the road served as the basin for a huge lake when the water happened to come in. Not for many years had a high tide risen above the road and flowed into the Carey fields beyond, but still the possibility always existed, and Dick Carey had suffered so much from fortune lately that he had suspected she might now take the opportunity of giving him a final buffet. However, he knew that so far as he was concerned the danger was fairly remote. With others it was different. For half a mile Farmer Routh's fields ranged along between the road and the sea; here were ten acres of oats waiting for the carrying; here two acres of potatoes not yet lifted; here the well-known heavy-bearing field, thickly dotted with shocks of wheat, with mangel-wurzel, and barley in the distance. Altogether, Farmer Routh had good reason to fear. To be sure, his rent was low, for it

was recognised that in spots his land was liable to an occasional visitation from the sea, but these visitations generally occurred later, when the crops had been gathered. Now, everything the sea touched would be ruined.

Dovetailed into Farmer Routh's land were a few acres rented by Ran Rettesworth, and though he had safely stocked the second crop of clover hay, with which most of it had been planted, there was still half an acre of potatoes which would certainly not be improved by submersion.

The time was eight o'clock in the morning; the tide would be at its height something after ten. Far out in the channel the tops of the wavelets glittered white; inshore the gurgling, rippling water was rapidly stealing inch by inch of the pebbly beach. The three men, each with his hand to his hat, stood and looked out to sea, and though the wind was strong enough to shake them where they stood, they affected hope.

"This here wind at this time of year can't last,"

said Ran Rettesworth. "I be sixty-five, and I never remembers seeing the tide come over at harvest before, and I don't believe it will now."

"We've had a couple of days of it," said Dick, "and I shouldn't be surprised if it blows itself out to-night."

" 'Twill be a rough lookout for some of us if it holds till Saturday," said Farmer Routh. "If it do I can see my wheat and barley going down Spithead."

"Don't you fear," said Dick. "Somehow I don't fancy the wind's so strong now as it was a couple of hours ago."

"There's a spit of rain," said Ran Rettesworth, "that's a good sign. Don't get any rain unless the wind's a-going to drop."

But it was only a splash of spray that had hit Ran Rettesworth in the face. When the three mounted the turf above the beach they could hardly keep their legs. They decided to stay and see how far the tide reached, and they found a

sheltered nook behind a clump of bushes at the edge of Farmer Routh's field of mangel.

"If the water comes in whom does it touch besides ourselves?" asked Dick.

"Well, the shore's a bit lower here than anywhere else," said Farmer Routh, "but there's one or two who'll feel it. Farm Twin for one. Harry Oaks is another who's got a bit of ground it will wash, and there's one or two others. But there ain't none of 'em got so much exposed as I have."

And from this they went on to talk disjointedly of the probability and improbability of the dropping of the wind. Meanwhile, time crept on, and the sea was rising.

"Blest if I don't think it's going to reach the grass," said Ran Rettesworth, looking out from the shelter of the bushes. "The tide wants another quarter of an hour to run, and it's pretty nigh level now."

All three stepped from the bushes, and made

for a place where the turf was slightly higher than usual. Here they stood, steadying each other by the shoulder and watching eagerly for the time when the water would begin to recede. But there was no sign of that yet. The rising tide had gathered force from the wind, and now it was near its height. As soon as white crests were formed they were cut off and sent whizzing through the air as spray, and the waves, grown larger now, slapped the shore quickly and spitefully. The three watchers were soon wet through with the flying moisture.

The minutes passed, the time of high tide had gone, but still the water seemed to rise. Little rivulets were beginning to trickle here and there over the grass in the direction of Farmer Routh's field. Half a minute later they had united into a broad and shallow stream. Farmer Routh's hand was shaking, but not from the wind.

"My God," he said, "it'll be over to-day."

"That can never be," said Dick, "can never be."

"Look, look!" said Farmer Routh, seizing his arm.

The sea, like a miniature cascade, was plashing down on the other side of the strip of turf into Farmer Routh's oatfield. No one said a word at first. The thing had come upon them with strange suddenness considering that they had been talking of it all the morning.

"It's all up," said Farmer Routh, at length. "We must have miscalculated. It's the top of the spring runners to-day."

"Hold on," said Dick suddenly. "Hold on a minute."

He pointed to the stream which was passing across the turf into Farmer Routh's field, and they saw that now it barely covered the short grass. In a minute it had stopped running altogether. The tide had turned. It is true the corner of Farmer Routh's field was a pond, but the size of the pond was trifling. For the time disaster was averted.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DAY OF THE HIGH TIDE

On Friday the gale lulled somewhat, but towards evening the southwester broke loose again, and roared, and raced, and fought the trees and houses, even more fiercely than before, and the village began to talk of what would occur on the morrow when the spring tides would be at the top of their power. Had it been a mere matter of a stiff wind on the one day only Hyben would have feared nothing, for a single day's wind, however strong, could not force the water high enough to do injury. But the villagers knew that for days past the southwester blowing heavily and continuously had been piling up the waters

of the channel all along the shore in the various inlets and harbours, with the result that a great body lay in these reservoirs, and this they knew would prove a potent help for mischief on Saturday if it should happen that the gale was still pressing onward the rising water. They watched eagerly for a lessening of the wind or a change in its direction. But it blew persistently without any kind of change.

All Friday night the wind howled among the tree-tops, lifted the thatch from cottages and ricks, and here and there whipped a tile from a roof. The force of the gale was plainly told by the uprooting of the big elm by the roadside, near the forge. William and Simon, who were out early, saw it heave, once, twice and thrice.

"She's coming over," said Simon.

Simon was right. A final blast tore up the already loosened roots, and with a ponderous crash the tree descended into the road. Other parts of

Hyben showed traces of the storm. The old thatched barn of Farmer Ribbon had been razed to the ground; a top-heavy wheat rick had been blown over in Mr. Brierley's rickyard, while most of the trees in the various orchards had been pretty well stripped of their fruit, the turf being yellow with fallen apples and pears. The wind lost no strength with the daylight. It roared with dull reverberation over all the land. The massive elms and oaks, by the sides of the fields, bent slowly and unwillingly beneath the blast, their upper branches swirling and clashing in fine commotion. Showers of leaves had given the roads a thick brown covering; and in the cornfields many of the shocks had been toppled over, and an occasional sheaf blown hither and thither and threshed of its grain.

During the night more water had come over and had added considerably to the pond in Farmer Routh's oatfield. A cluster of boys wandered round the edge of the pond, gloating over its ex-

istence, speculating with glee on the probability of the sea coming over again in the course of the day, and looking with perturbation at any sign of the dropping of the wind. Farmer Routh was prepared for the worst, but outwardly he was unshaken, and while his men were at work throughout the fields replacing the fallen sheaves, he had taken a horse and cart to the mangel field to fetch a load of the succulent leaves for the cows, who, owing to the storm, had to suffer a temporary confinement in the farmyard. As for Dick Carey, though he had gone down to the shore on Thursday morning, he had never seriously entertained the idea that the water would cross the road into the forty-acre, and on Saturday morning, with the remembrance of two or three strongly worded letters from creditors which had come by the early post, he went about his work occupied by his money troubles, and giving but an occasional thought to the high wind and the rising tide. But others had been impressed with the coming

danger, and from early morning one or two of the farmers, with the miller, and Ran Rettesworth, walked from point to point along the shore calculating the chances. The matter was discussed, too, by some who were not on the scene. Zachy, talking to Mr. Brierley and Nellie, showed himself filled with apprehension.

"Sure to be over presently," said he. "Why, we ain't had a wind like this here for eight or nine year past."

"Farmer Routh stands to lose a good deal, then," said Mr. Brierley.

"Not only him," said Zachy, "but a good many others as well. Look at Dick Carey."

"Surely, you don't think the water will cross the road?"

"Cross the road? Ah, that it will, and long before high water, too."

"Then his wheat will suffer?"

"I wouldn't give him twenty pound for the whole of the forty-acre this very minute."

"It's very terrible," said Mr. Brierley. "I can't think it's true."

"Well, you'll see," said Zachy; and then he went off to superintend the re-erection of the fallen wheat rick.

Nellie Brierley had said nothing, but as soon as Zachy was gone she went indoors, arrayed herself in a mackintosh, and then stole out and made her way across the fields in the direction of the shore. A walk of a mile or more, and she struck the main road, and had now only Farmer Routh's oatfield between herself and the beach. On the strip of turf skirting the beach there stood a group of men looking out to sea, and Nellie, curious as to what they saw, mounted the roadside railings and obtained a sight of the angry, swelling water. The wind forced her from her lofty perch, and she stood for a moment debating within herself what she should do. She felt she should not like to join the men on the beach, and yet the sight of that evil, all-powerful rising tide attracted while

it frightened her, and she wanted to see it again. At last she came to a decision, and walking on till she judged she was out of sight of the watchers, she climbed up the bank at the roadside and stood at a gap in the hedge, and with her arm round a sapling for support she looked out to sea. Little white waves were racing each other from the horizon to the shore, and though no violent display of big waves or breakers was to be seen, there was a grimness in the rapidity with which the water swept into an inlet a short distance away. The leaden sky, the roaring wind, the hurrying water, all bore witness to Nellie of Nature's sinister intent. Sometimes from gazing into the face of the wind she would turn and look at the forty-acre field of wheat on the other side of the road, as if to assure herself that it was impossible the tide should reach so far. Presently, with her eyes on the shore, she saw the waves were already at the ordinary high-water mark, and reckoning up, she found that three

hours had yet to pass before the tide would be at its height. She regained the road and slowly set off in the direction of home. Her face was very white.

Nellie passed through the rickyard on her way to the house, and as she did so met Zachy emerging from the carriage drive.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Going up to see this tide come over," said Zachy.

"I'll come up with you," she said impulsively.

And so for the second time she went towards the shore. When she and her companion drew near the oatfield they found that the men who had been watching on the shore had withdrawn to the road, their position on the turf being no longer safe. Ran Rettesworth was in the group, and Farmer Twin, besides Simon with his walking-stick and in his Sunday coat. Then there were the miller and his wife, half a dozen other villagers, and the cluster of expectant boys. The time sped

on. All were watching the bank of turf on the top of the shore, four hundred yards away. Every other second angry jets of white spray would appear above it, and occasionally spurts of water would leap several feet into the air. The watchers waited on and on, some standing still, some walking up and down, but all in painful suspense. They were anxiously waiting for the moment when the water would begin to pour over the top of the strip of turf into the oatfield below. With a muttered word now and then, they kept their eyes on the spot where the water would first come over.

Suddenly their suspense was broken. Level with the top of the turf appeared a panorama of the wave-lashed sea, which for a moment seemed actually to rise above the uncovered bank. The extraordinary sight was hardly realised by the watchers before, from a dozen places at once, spouts of glistening water began to descend from the edge of the grass down the bank into the

oatfield. There was a general murmur, mingled with shouts of jubilation from the boys. For perhaps thirty seconds the water was pouring over in cascades, then in a flash the cascades disappeared, and in their place was a vast, continuous roll of water curving in towards the watchers. The group in the roadway at once walked up the road to higher ground. Farmer Routh joined the party a minute or two later, and without a sign of emotion he surveyed the stretch of water in the oatfield, and gave a glance at the white streams which had begun to trickle into the fields further along the shore. A constraint had laid hold of the spectators, and for some seconds no one spoke, but presently the miller, judging that Farmer Routh was not so deeply affected by the disaster as at first seemed probable, ventured a word of consolation.

"Well, there's one thing, Farm Routh," he said, "this here water won't hurt the mangel much."

Farmer Routh's heavy face blazed into sudden fury.

"For God's sake, don't speak to me," he shrieked, and he showed his teeth like a wild beast. The miller shrank back in silence, appalled, and the little group was more embarrassed than ever.

The water still poured relentlessly in; the oatfield and the adjoining field were filled nearly to the level of the roadway.

"What's the time?" said Simon presently.

"Half past eleven," said the miller, looking at his watch.

"Another hour good for the tide to run," said Simon. " 'Twill be in Dick Carey's wheat 'fore long."

Simon was right. At twenty minutes to twelve the water was trickling from the oatfield across the dip in the roadway where the lookers-on had stood an hour before; at a quarter to twelve the water was coming across like a mill-race, and al-

ready a spreading lake showed itself in the forty-acre.

"Somebody ought to go and tell Carey," said the miller.

"I will, I will," came from the boys, and several of them set off at a run.

"Here, come back," shouted Simon, "come back. You just stay here; I'll go down and do that."

Simon spoke for the gathering. They all felt it was not fit the tidings should be conveyed by the boys.

Simon walked steadily down the road to the Careys' farm, where he found Dick bedding down one of the yards with fresh straw. Simon looked through the hedge that separated the yard from the road, and called to him. Dick at once crossed the yard to the road, and they spoke to each other through the hedge.

"Got bad news for ye, Mast Carey."

"Oh, have you?" said Dick quietly. "What is it?

"Why ain't ye up watching the tide?"

"What about the tide?"

"The tide's in your forty-acre!"

"In the forty-acre!" said Dick mechanically. "In the forty-acre!" He recovered himself in an instant. "I'll come up at once," he said. He took the news as he would have taken the news of a death.

CHAPTER XXII

DICK AND NELLIE MEET

DICK took his prong into the stables, and then started on his walk up towards the shore. Somehow he had not yet realised the heaviness of his latest misfortune, and he walked along with only a dull impression of further trouble and the vague thought that whatever happened his affairs could not be greatly worsened. He had to battle with the wind as he went, and once he set his teeth hard as a sudden gust brought him to a standstill, and then thrusting himself resolutely forward, plodded on triumphant. The physical encounter roused him somewhat, and he began to notice the great force of the wind; he saw a long, closely

woven hedge winding in and out like a serpent; in the distance he saw a tree bend and shudder twice before it fell; and close at hand he saw heavy corn sacks put to dry on the farmyard wall lifted high into the air. Presently he was seized with a painful curiosity about the tide and before he was half-way to the shore he hurried forward to a gate and hastily climbed it in order to see what progress the water was making. His eye was turned at once in the direction of the forty-acre, and he was struck with something like dismay, for reaching right across the field was a broad silver band. For the first time the full significance of Simon's news came home to him. He jumped from the gate to the road, and the next instant he was running as hard as he could in the direction of those who had from the first watched the incoming torrent. Before he reached them, however, his pride had lessened his pace to a walk again, and he came up with his face comparatively unconcerned. He knew personally all those present or

would have known them in ordinary times, but now he had only a general impression of the group, for his thoughts were all on the water. He would have stood there an hour by their side and heard them talking among themselves and yet at the end have been unable to give a single name. As it happened, however, when he turned to get a better view of the extremity of the forty-acre, he by accident caught sight of Nellie Brierley on the right of the little group, and for a moment his thoughts were diverted from the tide. Sweeping through his mind came the bitter reflection that she at least might have kept away at such a time. There were enough half-pitying spectators of his trouble without her; and he knew that any expression of cold sympathy she chose to make would be almost unbearable.

When Dick came up the people met him with silence, and it was not a hostile silence, for they were startled at the calamity which had befallen

him, and they wondered almost timidly at his feelings. The uncomfortable quietness was broken as before by the miller.

"This is a bad job, Mast Carey," said he.

"Yes," said Dick slowly, "a very bad job indeed."

Then all eyes were turned on the water again. The strip of turf on the top of the beach had given place to a roaring waterfall nearly half a mile in extent. With a steady rush the water came across the oatfield, across the road, and into the forty-acre, where in the low-lying parts it was already four feet deep. Bunches of oats were floating over the road into the forty-acre, buffeting the tops of hedges and railings projecting above the water, and finally mingling with the army of wheat sheaves swimming about in Dick's field.

Dick saw now that all his hopes and schemes were in vain, and that this, his latest misfortune, had decided his fate for him. Nothing remained to fight for. The sight of that ever-rushing water

told him he must be prepared to say good-bye to home and Hyben. The truth stabbed him deeply, and a cold, sick pain grew on him. He began to realise that Hyben with all its drawbacks and discomforts had become a part of himself. He could not force his imagination to his departure from the village, and as for living in another house the thought he knew would be quite beyond him till it was an established fact. He could not bring himself to believe that life would ever be quite the same apart from the old house. And his mother, how would she take it? There must be many a pang in store for her. He brooded on, and in spirit said good-bye to his old friends, both animate and lifeless. Everything belonging to the farm would of course have to go, and the first idea that struck him in this direction was that the cows would have to be sold. They had had cows ever since he could remember. Most of them were reared by his father many years ago, and to Dick everyone was a personality—old Charlotte, quiet,

an excellent mother, with eyes almost human; Deerfoot, a wild creature, slim and agile, a jumper from birth; Jumbo, heavy, ponderous, with short teats; Jinny, a fiery kicker; Heart, the elder and leader of the herd—not one but was more or less a friend. And from the cows Dick went on through all his farmyard acquaintances and friends. He felt himself missing them already.

The forty-acre was now a big lake, with sheaves of wheat bobbing up and down all over it, the water overflowing into the fields on each side.

But presently there came a time when the tide slackened. The water did not flow in so fast now. The rush became less and less, and then part of the grass strip on the top of the beach came into view. Very soon a thin continuous ridge grew up, separating the waters inland from the receding tide, and then the watchers knew for certain that the tide had turned. The little group did not depart, but still stood looking at the expanse of water, and their tongues now being loosened dis-

cussed all the probable effects of the flood. Dick, however, had seen more than enough, and he turned and set off for home to take the bad news to his mother. He believed that he showed himself cool and undisturbed, but he deceived himself, for his sunken eyes and his ashy face told plainly his despair. Nellie Brierley read the truth, as did several others, and as Dick walked away, they had confirmation in the touch of unsteadiness in his usually firm gait.

Dick had been walking for three or four minutes, when he found somebody was following behind. He gave a half glance round and was startled to find Nellie Brierley was close upon him. She hurried her step, and Dick saw that she was coming to speak to him, and he hesitated. The next instant she was within speaking distance, and she came forward with outstretched hand, her face lit up with feeling.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Carey," she said simply.

"Thank you very much," said Dick as he took

the extended hand. There was no cold sympathy here, and Dick felt the blood coursing round his heart with joy.

"Will it do a great deal of damage?" she asked almost pleadingly.

"I am afraid it will," said he.

Her face was rapidly driving Dick to forgetfulness of the high tide and every one of its effects, when suddenly he remembered he had held her hand all this while, and he dropped it slightly embarrassed, though no thought of the matter seemed to have occurred to Nellie herself.

"Are you going home?" he asked.

"Yes, and you?"

"I'm going, too."

They walked slowly down the road together, and they had covered a dozen yards before another word was spoken. Within the last few seconds a desperate determination had been growing in Dick's mind, a mad determination, it was true, but getting stronger every moment. What if he

were ruined? All the more reason to tell her of his love, since there would be no chance to tell it in the future, no chance, perhaps, of even seeing her again. He was free and untrammelled now, and almost the only living joy that remained to him was the thought of her face and form. It would be glorious if in the future he could think that Nellie knew of his love.

"Miss Brierley," he said suddenly, "I have something I want to say to you, for it is almost certain I sha'n't have the opportunity of speaking to you again. I hope you'll forgive me if I seem rough and rude."

Dick hesitated for a moment.

"Yes," said Nellie, quietly.

"It's about yourself, and I'll tell you the story without beating about the bush. I am afraid that ever since you came back to Hyben I have thought too much about you. The first sight of you altered everything in this world for me. Perhaps I ought to have resisted such a foolish feeling, but

I couldn't; I just let things slide. You lifted me into some other kind of existence, you were altogether above what I had ever dreamed of. The thought of you had such a hold on me that pretty well everything about you, little or big, became familiar to me. The way you carried your head, how you walked, and the way your eyes talked, all these and a lot of other things I used to treasure up. I daresay you'll think I'm very foolish, Miss Brierley, but I am telling you nothing but the solid truth. I remember when you first came home I would sometimes wake at night and wonder why I felt so happy, and then I would remember and would go to sleep again feeling that I was very close to Heaven."

Dick hesitated for a few seconds, but this time Nellie said nothing.

"I can even tell you what you wore. You wore a straw hat with a flapping brim; and it had pieces of ribbon crossing each other diagonally at the back. I described the hat to the mater, and she

said it was a Leghorn, and I remember I thought it was an ugly name for such a pretty thing. Then you wore a blue serge skirt with braid round the bottom, and you had a short jacket of bluey-grey. Whenever I see a bluey-grey jacket or a Leghorn hat or a blue serge skirt, my heart always comes into my mouth."

The noise of approaching wheels interrupted Dick, and caused Nellie to raise her eyes from the ground; Mr. Brierley's trap was coming toward them, with Mr. Brierley driving. The appearance of the trap came as a shock to Dick, and though he had nearly finished his confession, he ground his teeth at the interruption.

"Here comes your father," he said. "I suppose I have to say good-by now."

"I think I should like to go down West Lane a little way," she said.

West Lane, a bramble-grown cart track close at hand, turned off the main road to the right. Dick recognized the kindness that had prompted

the suggestion. Without another word they crossed to the lane. A sharp corner put them out of sight before Mr. Brierley passed the end.

"I don't think I have much more to tell you," Dick went on presently. "I am now only like one of the ordinary labourers of the place, and it's because I'm in that position, and you cannot therefore misconstrue what I say, that I have found the courage to confess to you. I daresay it all sounds very rude and presumptuous, but every word of it is true, and I have not been able to tell you half what I felt. If I have been too free I hope you'll forgive me."

Dick half expected she would reply, but she said nothing at first. But as they walked along their hands touched, and before Dick knew how it happened Nellie's hand had smuggled itself into his own. Then, with face rosy red, she looked up at him shyly, and Dick saw something in her eyes that for the moment overwhelmed him.

"Nellie," he whispered. And then he put his

arm around her, and the next instant her head was on his shoulder, and she was somewhere between laughing and crying.

* * * * *

A few minutes later Dick drew her back to where the trunk of a fallen tree made a convenient seat. There they explained to each other.

"Oh, Dick," she said, "you silly, silly Dick, and you never suspected it before?"

"Well, there was the curate, you see."

"The curate!" she said with scorn.

"And then there was my character; look at my reputation."

"Well, you have got something of a reputation," she said smiling, "but you know occasionally I have thought that perhaps there might be some little mistake about all these sins of yours. Do you know," she said, suddenly becoming serious, "that I have sometimes had to sit still while people spoke against you. Yes, actually, and sometimes I could hardly control myself, because I knew all

the time they were only repeating lies—lies every word. But there have been a few who spoke up for you. There's William. Oh, I do admire William," she said, as the interview with the curate came back to her.

"You don't know all his good qualities yet," said Dick.

And then Dick told her the story of his difficulties from the start, how calumny had overtaken him, the hostile attitude of the village, and his own fears and cowardice. He told her of the impulsive Phil and his freaks, of the theft from the blacksmiths', and all that followed it.

And when he had told her all this he looked down at her and found her eyes were filled with tears; and she took one hand of his and held it in both of hers caressingly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SINISTER RUMOUR

THE sale of the mortgaged land was now but a few days distant, and Nellie Brierley was discussing the matter in a general and quite indifferent way with her father over breakfast.

"It seems rather hard," she said, "that he and his mother should have this on top of their trouble with the flood. Even you, pa, must admit that."

"Well, he certainly has had a good deal to put up with one way and another, and this last blow is a very shocking one. To tell the truth, since the tide came over I have not felt exactly comfortable about this sale. It's down to take place in three days' time, and for very little I would stop it altogether."

"The best thing you can do, pa," said Nellie as calmly as she could, though had Mr. Brierley been observant he would have seen that her hand was shaking as she poured him out another cup of coffee.

"It looks like hitting a man when he is down," she added.

"Yes, and that's just the point. Young Carey never seems to admit himself down. Even now with all these difficulties on him he carries himself as though he had a thousand a year. There is not another farmer in the place but what will touch his hat when he meets me, but young Carey, born and bred in Hyben, barely returns my nod."

"Perhaps he thinks he is as much a gentleman as you are."

"Oh, that's ridiculous," said Mr. Brierley in a tone implying that even Dick Carey's presumption would not go so far as that.

"At any rate he has his good points, pa, and then you can't expect any man of spirit to be

particular in either looks or words to those he thinks have slighted him in his misfortunes."

"Yes, there's something in that, I suppose. Still I can't help feeling that he might be a little more respectful. However, he's had a good deal to bear, and there's one thing, he's not the thorough-going blackguard that his brother was. I must think about this matter of the sale to-day, and if my present mood holds it is possible I might—— But there, let's wait and see what the day brings forth."

Mr. Brierley, though hasty and somewhat arbitrary, was not a bad-hearted man, and Dick Carey's affairs were in his head nearly all the day. Next morning at breakfast he announced his decision.

"I have a good mind," he said, "to send to Gorcroft and Allen and stop the sale."

"I'm glad of that," said Nellie.

"Yes, it will make a lot of confusion, I daresay, and spoil arrangements made by a good many

people, but I think after all I'll do it. Perhaps it will be better for me to see Gorcroft and Allen than to write them. I'll drive over there this afternoon."

Nellie could have clapped her hands for joy. She felt perfectly happy, for she knew how much the decision meant to Dick. When her father had gone out she went about the house softly singing to herself. She tried to see Dick during the morning, but was unable to do so, and she came home shortly after mid-day telling herself she would have another try to catch him in the afternoon or evening on his return from one of the distant fields.

Mr. Brierley came in about one o'clock, and Nellie noticed that he looked thoughtful and worried. Lunch was ready, but Mr. Brierley was in no mood for eating.

"It is extraordinary," he said, "how easily one may be deceived in a man."

"Has anything gone wrong?"

"Oh, it's only in connection with Dick Carey."

"Dick Carey?" said Nellie, holding her breath.

"Yes; you remember I told you this morning I had half a mind to hold the sale over because I couldn't help feeling sorry for him?"

"I thought you had quite decided on it."

"A good job I didn't act on my decision then."

"Why?"

"Because it seems to me that it is the very thing he has been playing for."

Nellie did not speak, but looked at her father for further explanation.

"I have been talking to Frank Furlong and one or two others this morning, and it appears that within a week after the blacksmiths missed their money Dick Carey was able to pay at least two of his creditors substantial sums."

"Well?"

Nellie's tone was defiant now, and her father wondered what had come over her.

"The inference is pretty clear."

"You mean he stole the money?"

"I won't say exactly stole it, but it certainly looks as though he did not lose by his brother's theft."

"It's untrue, pa. Believe me, it's all untrue. He would never, never——"

"But what do you know about it, child?"

Nellie, who had been leaning forward, eager and excited, tried hard to regain an indifferent manner, for she saw that neither her indignation nor her pleading would do Dick any good. Besides, she might betray a secret which for the present must be kept.

"I was simply stating what I had heard. Up till to-day no one has cast a doubt on Dick Carey's honour or honesty, and it seems both cruel and cowardly for people to have told you such a thing."

"Your warm-heartedness is out of place here, Nellie. Why, you know he has been very hard up

for a long time, and here he suddenly pays away comparatively big sums."

"But it's only rumour after all, pa. Surely you do not intend to let the sale go on because of that?"

"There's more than usual in this rumour, Nellie, and I have made up my mind once for all to let the sale proceed."

And so it came to pass that Nellie had bad news instead of good news to tell Dick when she met him that evening, for he had not heard before of the rumour as to his dishonesty.

"I should like to meet the person who first started the tale," said he meditatively. "As to the money which is said to have been paid by me, believe me, Nellie, I know nothing. I certainly have not paid any money away. Unfortunately it has been out of the question."

"What will happen if the land does not fetch enough to pay pa to-morrow?"

"I shall sell what I have at the farm, square up

accounts if I am able to do so, and shift to some other place and begin afresh. Perhaps go to South Africa, who knows?"

"Poor Dick," she said.

"Not a bit of it. If it were not for the mater I wouldn't care what happened to-morrow. As it is I am very happy."

She squeezed his arm by way of answer.

"More bad news," she said. "Do you know your creditors have been summoned to meet at the 'Yew Tree' the day after to-morrow?"

"Yes, I have had a note asking me to attend. I suppose they are afraid I shall try to diddle them if things go wrong at the sale. They need not fear. I believe every one of them will be paid in full whichever way it goes."

"I think I might have some influence with pa if things really did go badly at the sale."

"You know we settled all that, dear. I am to get straight alone or not at all. That's the only favour I'm going to ask of you. When I have

cleared up and sold everything on the farm and am about to leave, I shall see your father and tell him how things stand between us, and that I hope in the course of a year or two to have made enough to ask for you in earnest. Till I speak you have agreed to say nothing, you know."

"There's another thing, Dick."

"Yes."

"I don't think I should like to wait two or three years."

"But you said you would wait and wait and would never——"

"I don't think I should like you to struggle all those years alone, and abroad, too."

Dick's breath was coming very fast.

"You mean you would come with me, Nellie?"

Nellie hid her face in his coat, which was sufficient answer, and for a time the two had no further need for words.

On the morrow, the day of the sale, Dick felt unfit for any kind of settled work, and he spent

the morning in polishing up the harness belonging to the market cart in which he intended to make the journey to Harton. The sale was fixed for three o'clock, and shortly before two Dick harnessed old Tom, and ten minutes later was jogging his way northwards to Harton.

The coffee room of the "Blue Lion" was filling up as he arrived, and Dick entered with the rest almost unnoticed. Most of those present were land-owners from the adjoining districts, though here and there was a Hybenite. Plans of the farm were in the hands of the majority, and the merits and demerits of the property were being discussed in undertones. Dick watched what was going on intently, wondering whether any one had decided to give the price which had to be reached if the land were to be retained by him.

The largeness of the amount, £2,500, made him fear. He was not to be in doubt for long. At five minutes past three the little auctioneer, his hands full of papers, came bustling into the room, fol-

lowed by his clerk, and after a short consultation with Dick, mounted a chair and proceeded to business. In a sharp, jerky tone he set forth the size and situation of the farm, gave a few laudatory details, and then prepared for offers.

"Now, gentlemen, what shall we say to start it? Here's an opportunity not to be missed. Come, now, put it in at some price. Shall we say two thousand, gentlemen?"

No one spoke, and the auctioneer, with finger uplifted, ran his eye over the assembly. There was no indication of a bid.

"Come, gentlemen, put it in at some price. Don't let such an opportunity go begging. What was that you said? A thousand, thank you, sir. A thousand offered for this valuable property. Now, gentlemen, what advance on a thousand pounds?"

A retired brewer from Petersfield had started the bidding on the off chance of getting a bargain, but he was disappointed.

"Twelve hundred," said Mr. Brierley's lawyer in order to give the bidding a fillip.

"Twelve hundred offered," said the auctioneer with renewed energy. "Twelve hundred offered. What advances on twelve hundred?"

"Thirteen," said a Portsmouth estate agent.

"And fifty," said Mr. Brierley's lawyer.

A pause in the bidding ensued, and for some minutes the auctioneer exhorted in vain. Finally the Petersfield brewer made a big jump with the intention of frightening off other competitors.

"Sixteen hundred," he said.

"Sixteen hundred and fifty," said the estate agent.

"Seventeen hundred," said Mr. Brierley's lawyer.

Then came another long pause.

At length the estate agent said "eighteen hundred and fifty," and shrugged his shoulders.

"Nineteen hundred," came the lawyer's reply.

The auctioneer did his best, but though he

harangued the gathering at considerable length he received no further offer, and so the land found no purchaser, and Dick Carey was ousted. Dick had expected the result, and he left the sale-room with no sense of deep disappointment.

CHAPTER XXIV

WILLIAM TELLS A LIE

DICK's creditors began to assemble early at the "Yew Tree" on the following day. Half an hour before the appointed time a group of them were talking over matters before the actual business of the meeting commenced. The general tone was decidedly hostile to Dick.

"It's my belief he has something up his sleeve," said Mr. Carter, an old landowner from Southampton. "Things appear to have gone from bad to worse with him, and yet ever since the high tide nothing has seemed to trouble him. I'll bet you what you like he has something up his sleeve."

"I saw him at the sale yesterday," said Mr. Green, the threshing machine proprietor, "and he was as much at his ease as if it hadn't been a sale

at all. Once I actually caught him smiling to himself. I don't like the look of it. He may think the matter a good joke, but it's far from a joke to most of us. We don't mind laughing when we gets our money, but not before."

"He won't try that trick on here this afternoon," said Mr. Lupe, a dealer from Fareham, who sat glowering at one end of the table. "He'll pretty soon find it ain't no laughing matter."

Mr. Brierley came in at this point, and as soon as he was seated one or two asked him his opinion with regard to Dick Carey's behaviour.

"I have heard some very nasty rumours," said Mr. Brierley, "but I think it would be better to put off talking about this matter till Mr. Carey comes. Possibly he has some surprise for us; he may have some explanation to give."

"I hope so," said Mr. Carter, "for I confess at present I don't see where the money is to come from."

"There's the thirty acres, and the house and

outbuildings; we haven't heard anything about them yet," said Mr. Lupe.

"You may be sure," said Mr. Wilkins, the seed merchant, decisively, "that they are mortgaged up to the hilt. I lay he has raised every farthing on them one way or the other."

"If he still holds them, out and out," said Mr. Carter, "things are not so bad."

"Don't you delude yourself," said Mr. Green. "He has raised money on them long ago. But what I should like to know is where's that money his brother took from the blacksmiths?"

He gave a meaning look round the group, and one or two nodded at him in approval.

"Hush, hush," said Mr. Brierley. "I think we ought to wait till he comes before we talk of that. Let him have an opportunity of answering questions."

While this discussion was going on in the "Yew Tree," another was taking place in the forge, not two hundred yards away.

"What's all these people going down to the 'Yew Tree' for?" said William, after looking up once or twice at the passers-by.

Simon was engaged in mending an iron hoop, but he straightened his back in order to take observation of the people in question. For perhaps a minute the partners stood upright gazing and wondering what the unusual gathering meant. Suddenly Simon turned to William.

"Lawk me," said he, "this is that air meeting what they come and told us about the other day. People what young Dick Carey owes money to. They asked one of us to go."

"Never thought of that," said William slowly. "How many of 'em is there there?"

"I've seen a dozen or more go by myself."

For a couple of minutes no other word was spoken, and the partners proceeded with their work.

Presently William put down his hammer. "Look here," he said, "one of us ought to be at that air meeting."

"That's what I was a-thinking," said Simon. "You go, William, will ye? I couldn't put up with that air crowd for long."

"Right ye are, mate. I'll just pop along, and see how things goes."

Whereupon William went indoors, washed his face and hands, put on his best coat, and set off for the "Yew Tree."

Most of the creditors had already arrived, and they were scattered irregularly round the long deal table, Mr. Carter being in the chair at the far end, he having been elected to preside over the gathering. William gazed full face at those who turned to look at him when he entered, and returned gruff "good days" to the individual greetings that came from various parts of the room. Dick Carey sat about half-way down the table, in apparent indifference to the talk that buzzed round him.

Mr. Carter called for silence by rapping loudly on the table with his knuckles.

"Gentlemen," he said, "all of you know what we are here for, and that is to discuss how we stand with regard to Mr. Carey, and to hear from him (if he will be so kind) how he thinks of meeting the various claims we have against him. Many of us have had to wait a good while for our money, and some of us have been afraid that in the end we should not get it at all, but for my part, I can't help thinking that Mr. Carey has some way out of the difficulty, and will in the end satisfy all of us. Meanwhile, I think I am right in saying that all here sympathise with him in the misfortune which has overtaken him in the flooding of his ground." Two or three perfunctory "hear, hears" came from round the table, but there was no heart in them.

"I'll read out the particulars of the claims," said the chairman, "and if Mr. Carey has an objection to any one of them, perhaps he will be good enough to state it."

Then followed a long list, which took some

time in the reading, Dick listening with care, and occasionally calling for a halt for the purpose of referring to his own papers. At last it was finished, and Dick was expected to make some kind of statement. Now, Dick had seen the generally antagonistic attitude of the meeting, and he felt in no hurry to relieve their fears and suspicions by telling them what he would have to tell them before the meeting came to a close, namely, that the farmhouse and the thirty acres round it were quite unencumbered, and would enable him to pay his debts practically in full.

"I am sorry," he said, "that a series of mishaps has delayed the payment of the money I owe to you, gentlemen. I have done my best by seeking extension of time to recover myself, but some of you being very naturally in a hurry for the money which was undoubtedly due to you, did not leave me much time for consideration or for recovery. I ought not to complain about that, however, and don't intend to."

"I should think not" came from the end of the table, and there were murmurs from one or two other places.

Dick disregarded the interruption, and went on: "That leads me to say that, in spite of my difficulties, I for a long time hoped to be able to pay my debts in full without serious inconvenience to myself. This hope I held up to very recently."

The murmurs were recommenced here. Dick's confident and unmoved manner suggested cool effrontery.

"Succeeding troubles, however, have, I fear, rendered that well-nigh impossible, and——"

"That's all nonsense," interrupted Mr. Lupe; "if you had the money then, you've got it now."

"Order, order," said the chairman. "Mr. Lupe, I must ask you not to interrupt."

"Oh, but I will interrupt," said Mr. Lupe excitedly. "I, for one, don't intend to be diddled out of my money if I can help it."

"Really, really, Mr. Lupe," put in the chairman.

"I don't care what you says, I'm a-going to speak," exclaimed Mr. Lupe; and the chairman gave way.

"This here mouthing from Dick Carey is all very well, but it don't fill our pockets, and his smooth words won't get over me, for one, especially knowing what I knows. And what I says is this, that fair's fair, and if one man's paid another ought to be, too."

Mr. Lupe paused for a moment. "What I want to know is this," said he, reaching his climax, "what has Dick Carey done with William's money?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Dick, to the chairman. "Perhaps Mr. Lupe will be good enough to explain what he means?"

"I won't say no more," said Mr. Lupe, "but here's Mast Flinton."

Flinton, the Harton carpenter, sat next to Mr.

Lupe, and in response to the look of invitation that met him from various sides, he stood up. He was a man of few words.

"All I've got to say is, that I received ten pounds off my account on July twenty-eighth."

"And I," said Mr. Green, "received ten pounds on July twenty-ninth."

"Since so much has been stated," said the chairman, "I feel bound to say that on July twenty-eighth I had five pounds from Mr. Carey. I received the money by letter, and was told no receipt was needed."

"And I," "and I," said the others.

"There is some extraordinary mistake," said Dick, standing up. "I should be only too pleased if the sums in question had been paid by me, but I am sorry to say I can't claim credit for having paid them. I've not paid any one of these gentlemen, who have spoken, a farthing since last May."

William was the only one who remained im-

passive under this statement. Mr. Brierley and the chairman seemed almost pained, while the faces of most of the others present bore either a frown or a leer. The looks of all told plainly their suspicions, suspicions which in the minds of most bordered on certainty. Dick could not understand their attitude. The hidden meaning in all their faces oppressed him like a nightmare, and then Nellie's tale of Mr. Brierley's suspicions came back to him.

"Mr. Chairman," he said sharply, "there is some insinuation in what has been said. May I ask you what it is?"

One or two bent across the table and spoke to the chairman in an undertone, and then he rose to his feet.

"My task is a painful one, Mr. Carey, but I am going to answer the plain question you have put to me. You have heard of the payments, said to have been made by you on July twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth?"

The chairman paused, for he was really a kind-hearted man.

"Yes, yes," said Dick impatiently.

"And what we are thinking about," interrupted Mr. Lupe roughly, "is that the robbery at the blacksmiths' took place on July twenty-sixth!"

Strangely enough, the verbal expression of the thought that had been in the minds of the gathering came as a shock to them, for though all had known it, all were somewhat ashamed at the suspicion being put into words. Only two of those present were surprised, namely, William and Dick Carey. William's thin lips seemed thinner than ever as he sat there, with mouth compressed, grim and expectant. Several looked at him in expectation that he would speak, but he said not a word. Dick, on the other hand, showed his feelings plainly. His face was flushed, his head had gone back in scorn and contempt as he realised the accusation. Resentment and disdain were struggling for the mastery as his eyes flashed round

the table. But as he stood there, erect, defiant, it slowly grew on him that the speakers had said nothing but what they believed to be the truth, and then more slowly still, the explanation of it all trickled into his mind. Phil, with the remainder of the money in his hands, had sent to various creditors an instalment of the amount owing to them, with a view of doing Dick a good turn without the latter knowing it. He sickened as he realised all his discovery meant. Of course he could not expose Phil, even though silence were taken as admittance of his own guilt. The only way was to tell the simple truth, that he had no knowledge of the money which had been sent, and should feel bound to pay the amount over again. But as he glanced round at those who were watching him, he recognised his foolishness in supposing they would believe the truth, for he knew they had seen the blood rush to his face, had seen his mortification, and finally his doggedness as he prepared to face the worst. All these changes

were, as Dick knew, so many proofs of his guilt, and he could see they already despised him. He prepared himself for resolute silence.

William was the only one present who held the key to the mystery, and he was fidgeting in his chair, as though he were turning something over in his mind. The tension of the meeting was relieved by the chairman.

"This is a most unpleasant matter," he said, "and we seem to have got off the track of our proper business. We must keep to the original purpose of the meeting, please, and I think we had better hear what Mr. Carey has to say with regard to the settlement of the debts, and drop this other matter altogether."

"No, you don't," roared Mr. Lupe; "no, you don't. It's bad enough not to get our money, but it's worse to be done out of it by a rogue. I tell Dick Carey to his face that he's a blasted thief!"

In an instant the meeting was in confusion.

Shouts ran round the table, most of them applauding, one or two beseeching quiet. Dick's foot was already on the chair, his eyes were glistening, and he measured the distance across the table to Mr. Lupe. Suddenly he was seized by the rough and muscular hand of William, and was for the moment held back.

Cries of "Oozebird," "Cheat," "Thief" were coming from all round the room, but William, rapping the table fiercely with his walking-stick, brought about silence.

" 'Pend upon it, never see such a lot in all my life," said he. "What be all a-raving at?"

"Why, he took your money, William, you know he did."

"What if he did?" shouted William. "What if he did? 'Twas our money, warn't it? 'Twasn't nobody else's. But he didn't take it. Nobody took it. You've been hollering for nothing. Simon found the money a fortnight afterwards in the cupboard under the stairs, where I stowed it

one day amongst the walnuts unbeknownst to myself. We ain't never lost no money, and nobody never stole it!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE RESULTS OF WILLIAM'S LIE

AFTER the first exclamations of surprise, those present set themselves to discuss William's revelation with all the energy at their command, and the chairman, seeing it was useless to attempt to regain order, joined in the general talk. All kinds of opinions were expressed, and everywhere there was the conviction that Dick Carey and his brother had been completely cleared; after what William had said there was no alternative, and Mr. Lupe and one or two of the more violent spirits were, to do them justice, a little ashamed of themselves, though they showed no sign of it, and talked louder than ever to hide any traces of

embarrassment. As for Dick, he was stunned by William's generous falsehood, and for a few seconds afterwards hesitated as to whether he should contradict him or not, but he soon saw that even if he could obtain a hearing no good would be done by denying the blacksmith's statement, so he remained silent. Mr. Brierley, in his revulsion of feeling, leaned across the table and shook Dick's hand heartily. The rest of the gathering had almost forgotten the presence of Dick, and Dick, after looking round and finding that William had disappeared, made his way into the road in search of him. But William had already reached the forge, and was now putting on his apron preparatory to starting again on his work at a new plough coulter.

It was by no mere chance that Nellie Brierley was near the "Yew Tree" when Dick left, for she had heard from her father that Dick was likely to have a very unpleasant time, and the thought had so worked on her as the afternoon wore on that at

last she had walked down towards the "Yew Tree," and pretending to watch the antics of some colts in a field a hundred yards away, waited till the meeting was over. Should her father come out first she would, of course, have to walk home with him, and be content, for the present, with his version of the story, but it was just possible that Dick might be the first to leave. And so it happened. Her eyes lit up as she saw him enter the road, and she went eagerly towards him.

"Surely, miss, this is most imprudent," said he, smiling. "Suppose you were seen in company with Dick Carey?"

"I couldn't bear to wait till pa got home to know the result of the meeting," she said.

"The meeting had no proper result. William made a short speech and broke the meeting up."

Then as they slowly made for home he told her what had occurred, Nellie's eyes flashing as she heard the names that had been flung at Dick, and softening again as she heard of William's inter-

ruption. At the end she was brimming over with pride and pleasure, first at William's stalwart declaration, and then at her father's congratulation to Dick.

"Dick," she said, "I have always believed, till now, that to tell a lie about the smallest thing was not only wrong, but cowardly. But I don't know what to think about William. That was a very big lie of his?"

"It was," said Dick.

"And yet I am sure he is a very good man."

"I think so, too," said Dick quite gravely. "It must have cost him something to say what he did, for William has a deeply ingrained habit of telling the truth."

"Dear old William," said Nellie reflectively.

Dick and Nellie had been walking very close together, and it was not difficult to see from their attitude that they were on friendly, if not intimate, terms. Imagine, then, the surprise of Mr. Furlong, as he came along the road, on seeing the

two together. But though the curate was acute enough in most things, he was not possessed of sufficient imagination to gauge the real situation, and though the truth flitted across his mind as a suspicion, it was altogether too marvellous to be accepted. He became annoyed at what he thought the young farmer's presumption, the more annoyed because Nellie did not resent it. It was unfortunate, too, that Mr. Furlong should have known the hostile nature of the meeting that had just taken place, without knowing what had actually occurred. And thus it was that he walked unsuspectingly up to the cannon's mouth.

"Here comes Frank Furlong," said Nellie.

"And what's equally important," said Dick, "here's your father coming along behind us."

Nellie turned round. Her father had just left the "Yew Tree," and following behind him, deeply engaged in talk, were three or four of the others from the meeting.

Dick looked at Nellie.

"You can escape by the lane at the side of the forge, if you want to," he said.

"I don't want to escape," said Nellie.

For reply Dick offered her his arm. Then, linked together, they walked on to meet the curate.

Mr. Furlong was so utterly astonished that he hardly believed his eyes, and even now he did not grasp the truth. He raised his hat, and said "Good evening" to Nellie. Dick Carey he ignored. Nellie determined he should eat ashes.

"Let me introduce you to my friend," she said. "Dick, this is Mr. Furlong; Mr. Furlong, Mr. Carey."

Mr. Furlong was somewhat confused, but he nodded hurriedly at Dick, and then said: "Can I speak to you alone for a moment, Miss Brierley?"

"I am afraid not, just now; but Mr. Carey is my friend, and you may speak plainly."

The significance of this was not lost on the

curate, and with rising indignation he went on to do what he told himself was his duty.

"It's most painful to me, Miss Brierley, I assure you, but do you really know the character of this—this—gentleman? I would not give pain to anyone for a moment, much less to a friend of yours, but I can't think you know what's alleged against him, in fact almost proved against him."

"I don't know what you mean," said Nellie.

Nellie was feeling very bitter just then. She despised the curate from the bottom of her heart. Mr. Furlong, however, was very much in earnest.

"Do you know he is a thief?" said he excitedly.

"You forget yourself, Mr. Furlong. Mr. Carey is my friend."

"I didn't mean to offend. But here comes your father; he'll explain to you what I mean."

Mr. Brierley was close on them now, and his amazement was not much less than that of the curate, while those following behind shared the

general astonishment at the sight of Dick and Nellie arm in arm.

"I was just telling your daughter," said the curate, as Mr. Brierley came up, "of the painful rumours attached to the name of her companion. I felt sure I was doing what you would wish, unpleasant as the task was proving."

But the curate did not know his man. His words had been overheard by those following behind Mr. Brierley, and had Dick Carey been as black as he was painted, Mr. Brierley's pride would have made him support his daughter. As it was, Mr. Brierley remembered that the curate had been one of the first to doubt Dick Carey's honesty.

"You are under some misapprehension," he said, "and any rumours about Mr. Carey are quite unfounded. In any case, my daughter may safely be entrusted to select her own friends."

This shower of cold water restored the curate's self-possession. "Then all that remains for me

to do is to say good evening," he returned, and raising his hat he walked away.

Nellie recognised that her father's pride had come to the assistance of Dick and herself, and knew that the battle was not yet won, so she took Dick over to him and said quietly: "Pa, let me introduce you to a very close friend of mine."

Now, Mr. Brierley had severe thoughts in his mind against his daughter when he dismissed the curate, but her winsomeness for the moment turned his hard intentions.

"I already know Mr. Carey," he said, "but I confess that till now I did not know he was a friend of my daughter."

The last few words were turned in Dick's direction, and Dick answered them.

"That's entirely my fault," he said. "It would have been but the matter of a week or two before you had heard the whole story. Before I left Hyben for good I should have come to you and told you everything. To-day's happenings seem

to have altered all arrangements. Perhaps you can spare me a few minutes later in the day, when I can explain what I daresay at present looks something like a mystery."

All three were now walking in the direction of home. Nellie had released Dick's arm, and was walking between him and her father.

"Yes, it certainly seems to me that some explanation is needed," said Mr. Brierley. "Perhaps it would be better if you could come up now."

"I think I should like a little talk with you first," said Nellie.

"Just as you like," said Mr. Brierley quietly.

He had lost the superior air with which Dick was familiar, for the surprises of the day had not been without their effect on him, greater than Nellie was inclined to suspect, for it is to be feared he would have been not nearly so tolerant, in spite of her influence, had he felt no compunction for the wrong he had done to Dick.

"Perhaps Mr. Carey will look up this evening?"

"I shall be very pleased," said Dick.

* * * * *

What it was that Nellie said to her father in the interview when they reached home, no one (except, perhaps, Dick Carey) will ever know, but Nellie must have been in deadly earnest, for when she left him Mr. Brierley sat for a long time deep in thought, gazing vacantly through the window into the garden. His eyes were moist. He had never known that Nellie could be so strongly moved, and Nellie was the only one left in the world to him, and he loved her very dearly, and her happiness stood before all other matters. He had intended great things for her, and it was not in nature that he should feel no touch of disappointment, and at first Mr. Brierley had felt more than a touch, his disappointment was deep and strong. But Nellie had told him her tale so simply and appealingly, that his dreams vanished as

she went on, and he realised, before she had finished, that life to her without Dick Carey would be but half life. And as he stood there thinking, he could not help feeling something like a glow of admiration for the stubborn, upright Dick, who, with all his faults of pride and manner, had shown no sign of flinching under trouble, had struggled fiercely with misfortune, and in the end had faced disaster manfully.

The Mr. Brierley whom Dick met that evening was a different person from the Mr. Brierley Dick had known before.

"I am sorry that I misjudged you," said he. "Nellie has told me all that has happened, and I have sincerely to ask your pardon."

"There's no need for that," said Dick. "It seems to me that I have often courted misconception."

Presently Dick told the tale of his love for Nellie, and all it meant for him. It appeared preposterous, he said, to confess so much in his pen-

niless condition, but he hoped, before long, to make his way in another country.

"Another country?" said Mr. Brierley. "Why another country?"

"I must sell the little farm and the house to settle all the debts," said Dick.

"I shouldn't like to see you leave Hyben, Dick. What do you say to taking on the mortgaged farm again? Who knows, perhaps prejudice had a good deal to do with that notice of foreclosure. If I try to make amends this way you must not prevent me."

"You are very good," said Dick. "Nothing would delight me more, but I don't think I can escape my present difficulties without selling the old farm, and that seems to put your scheme out of the question."

"I have thought of that, and I am going to lend you the money to pay off all outstanding debts."

Dick was staggered.

Mr. Brierley saw his confusion. "Thank Nellie," he said gruffly.

But even then it was not till Dick saw Nellie, later in the evening, that he learned the full extent of Mr. Brierley's generosity. Dick had been explaining how matters stood, and had mentioned the fresh mortgage, and the low rate of interest which her father proposed to charge, and then she told him he would have to pay still less in the time that was coming, for the mortgage was to be her wedding gift.

* * * * *

Dusk had come, and Dick and Nellie were in the orchard where she had so severely rebuffed the curate.

"Nellie," he said, "won't you come home and see the mater?"

"I have wondered," she said, "why you have not asked me before."

They walked into the adjoining lane, now quite deserted, and with its outlines softened in the fad-

ing light. The wind rippled among the last leaves on the tree-tops, and occasionally there came the gentle ringing of a bell on the neck of a cow in a distant meadow. The scent from a group of firs was faintly perceptible above that of the grass and the greenery of the hedges, and the night was warm and balmy, as one in midsummer. The quietness and peacefulness spread over all things seemed to have entered the souls of Dick and Nellie. They walked slowly down the road into the gathering darkness, hand in hand, and neither of them spoke for a long time. Presently Nellie said in a whisper: "Dick, what are you thinking of?"

"I am thinking," he said softly, "that God has been very good to me!"

THE END.